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## **“Deserting the broad and easy way”: Southern Methodist Women, the Social Gospel, and the New Deal State, 1909-1939**

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“Deserting the broad and easy way”: Southern Methodist Women, the Social Gospel, and the  
New Deal State, 1909-1939

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in History

by

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July 2020  
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This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## Abstract

Over the course of three decades, white southern Methodist women took on issues of labor and poverty through their national women's organization, the Woman's Missionary Council (WMC). Between 1909 and 1939, the WMC focused their work on five groups of people they viewed as in need of their help: women, children, black southerners, immigrants, and rural people. Motivated by the Social Gospel and an intense belief that their faith led them to effect real change in the American South, the WMC intervened in people's lives, pursuing reform that could at times be maternalistic and condescending but at other times radical and forward-thinking. Methodist women ultimately concluded that only state intervention could solve the systemic problems facing the poor and working-class, and they became staunch supporters of the New Deal. This dissertation examines the path to this conclusion, tracing the ways in which the WMC thought about and sought to help these groups changed over the span of thirty years, as World War I and the Great Depression shattered how the women viewed themselves and the world around them. Often at odds with other southerners of their race, class, and denomination, the women pressed onward in their bid to create an American welfare state. When the WMC dissolved into a new organization in 1939, white southern Methodist women were poised to be unprecedented allies in the mid-twentieth century civil rights movement.

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with Katie Powell, as we compared notes on grad programs, discussed history, and lamented the challenges of pursuing degrees while working full time. And nothing was more delightful than daily texts with Liz Caruth and Mary Alice Keller, two of the best friends a person could have. I am lucky to count all these women as my friends, each of whom provided encouragement and support in her own unique way.

I'm not sure I could have finished this dissertation while working full time if that work hadn't been in the University of Arkansas Honors College. To my friends and colleagues in Honors, thank you for the love and support you've shown me over the last 6+ years. In particular, I thank Dr. Lynda Coon, Dr. Jennie Popp, and Dr. Noah Pittman for encouraging my scholarship in the midst of my work in higher education. And for giving me time off to write! Dr. Coon, I finally finished my bit of "journalism."

I've never understood why people saved their partners and families for the very end of this section, but I think it's because the support and sacrifices of loved ones are so monumental compared to everyone else. I am grateful to my loving family and their many years of support. If I ever win the lottery, I'm going to endow a professorship for agricultural labor history in my dad's name.

My beloved Daniel has made my time in graduate school one of great joy. Our marriage has spanned all three of my college degrees, yet his support for my academic endeavors never wavered, even as we built our life together, our careers, and our family. Whether it was encouraging me to write when I didn't want to or telling me it was ok to take a day off, Daniel always seemed to know just what to say to keep me moving forward. I'd say I was looking forward to spending all the upcoming new free time together, but I imagine the baby will take care of that when he arrives in just a few months. I can't imagine a better partner – in academia,

in work, in parenting, in life. This project is as much a product of his labor as it is mine. All my love and gratitude.

## Dedication

To Dena Williams, who taught me to love to read.

To Christy Graham, who taught me to love to write.

And to Glenn William Hodge, who I hope will learn to love both.

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## Introduction

“Auxiliary superintendents, catching this vision of need, are deserting the broad and easy way of visits, trays, and flowers,” wrote Bertha Newell in 1932. For decades, the women of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS) had been relegated to the novel work of friendly visits and charitable handouts. However, the Woman’s Missionary Council, in which Newell served as the superintendent of the Bureau of Christian Social Relations, spurned these easy feminine tasks in favor of meaningful intervention in the most pressing issues of their day. Newell wrote that Methodist women interpreted “social service” in terms of “Christian Citizenship, International Peace, Interracial Co-operation, Industrial Relations, and Rural Development.”<sup>1</sup> With almost three hundred thousand members at their command, the WMC quickly moved beyond the traditional purview of women, the home, in order to pursue real change for the American South.

Southern Methodist women spent almost half a century engaged in a broad array of charitable and activist work. This research focuses on the domestic mission work of the Woman’s Missionary Council (WMC). Founded in 1910, the WMC was the most important outlet for Methodist women’s activism for almost thirty years, until the denomination was revised after the merger of northern and southern Methodists in 1939. The work of the WMC was given a sense of urgency by the social problems experienced by the working class and encountered by the women - rapidly changing industrial relations, harsh living conditions of the rural poor, and stagnant race relations that contradicted their belief in the value of individual human life. As mostly middle class, urban white women, they were not intimately familiar with the realities faced by the working class or rural southerners, but they countered this deficit by

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<sup>1</sup> “Twenty Second Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1932), 108.

undertaking extensive efforts to study and understand the issues of race, labor, and poverty.

Their concerns for the poor brought their attention to issues of industry and labor, lobbying for legislation against child labor, advocating for women's equal pay, and pushing for interracial efforts in and out of the church.

Methodist women felt compelled to act on issues not usually the purview of their gender and class because of their commitment to the social gospel. The social gospel taught that the kingdom of God on earth could only be realized through the creation of a just and godly social order. Proponents of the social gospel certainly never gave up on personal conversion to faith, but they believed God called them to convert society as well.<sup>2</sup> Mrs. R. W. MacDowell was clear about this in her publication for the WMC in 1918:

Many of our preachers were slow to recognize the importance of this social evangelism. They could not realize that the care of a sick body or the influence of mental inspiration or the cleaning up of a social environment was a part of the gospel of our Christ. While the settlement movement was new in the South, it was but the modern incarnation of the principles for which John Wesley stood and practiced in his early ministry in England...The establishment of the kingdom on earth means not only saving the individual, but saving his environment.<sup>3</sup>

Methodist women were able to embrace a social gospel because they adapted it to their particular class and religious world view. In their understanding, their resources and connections gave them the perfect means to create real change for the poor and working class. They tied this practice directly to the teachings of John Wesley, who believed that personal connection offered opportunity for spiritual guidance. The women practiced an evangelism that taught physical care would bring about a conversion of faith, rather than the belief that faith in God would then bring earthly blessing. Only by preparing the way – raising wages and reducing hours, reforming

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<sup>2</sup> Wendy J. Deichmann Edwards and Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, eds., *Gender and the Social Gospel* (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Mrs. R. W. Macdonell, "The Story of the Years of City Mission Work" (November 1918), 8, Adult Year Book 1918-1919, Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

tenant farming and oversight of factories, fostering interracial relationships – could the earthly kingdom of God become a spiritual one.

Over time, the WMC abandoned the “broad and easy way” for a more overt activism that would hopefully bring about systemic change. Their early work was largely focused on the home, education, and spiritual salvation, but the influence of the social gospel pushed the women out of the home and into systemic economic and societal issues. The women came to realize that their traditional work – clothing drives, Sunday schools, mother’s clubs, and the like – were insufficient to meet the needs of desperate southerners. The women eventually embraced their roles as political actors, using their collective influence to advocate for legislation at the local, state, and federal level. Eventually they became full-throated supporters of the New Deal.

Over the course of thirty years, the WMC grew from a typical voluntarist charitable organization into a lobbying apparatus for the welfare state, an advocate for a more pluralistic, inclusive society, and a staunch supporter of an integrated denomination. This dissertation is an analysis of these remarkable developments, placing the social gospel at its center. The WMC set out to help four key groups of people – children, rural white farmers, white immigrant miners, millhands, and factory workers, and African Americans – and in the process came to realize that the church was failing each one. For some, the solutions to the difficulties these groups faced were simply beyond the reach of the church. Only through the direct intervention of the government, at every level, could they hope to solve systemic economic and social issues and bring about the kingdom of God on earth. For others, the church simply failed to acknowledge the humanity of those of different race and ethnicity. Thus, the spiritual mission of the church became an intensely political one. This made the women of the WMC outliers within their race and class, as middle- and upper-class white southern men increasingly opposed New Deal

policies in the late 1930s. Over the course of thirty years, the WMC's understanding of the poor and working class changed, and their tactics for helping changed with it. This analysis explains how white, middle-class women could become such strident supporters of a federal welfare state, placing the power of aid not in the church but in the government.

This offers a revision of the role of women in the creation of an American welfare state. The current literature too often leaves women out of the narrative, instead focusing on the working-class social gospel movement and its support of economic reform and the upper-class white, male opposition to changes wrought by the New Deal. The women of the WMC were somewhere in the middle of this divide, not working-class but committed to the social gospel, the New Deal, and reform. Their decades of experience battling the most pressing issues facing the poor and working-class South, combined with their unique identities as middle-class, white, women followers of the social gospel, created a powerful and unique force in the quest for a new social order. At the center of this confluence of class, gender, and religion, the WMC complicates our understanding of the welfare state and the post-war order.

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The literature on social gospel activism in the South – male and female – touches both on organized, denomination-based activism and the work of preachers and believers who often worked outside the rules of their churches. By the 1990s historians began to question the commonly held belief that the social gospel did not infiltrate the South. However, these works argue that the social gospel is most clearly seen in the southern working class, leaving little room for the women of the MECS. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the MECS began developing into a powerful southern denomination. Increasingly, the church turned away from its rural and working-class roots to embrace a more mainstream, politically conscious position in the

southern politics and society. Its leaders were often wealthy, with important roles in politics, government, and industry.<sup>4</sup> The MECS still maintained large membership and churches in rural areas – this was the early twentieth century South after all – but leadership looked increasingly different than the church body.

The WMC also represented a more elite faction of the church. By 1939, approximately three hundred thousand women took part in the WMC's home and foreign mission societies. Yet this was a minority of the MECS's three million members, a majority of which were women.<sup>5</sup> The leadership in particular were middle- and upper-class. Many were married to Methodist pastors or came from wealthy families, and most were highly educated for the time period. For instance, Belle Bennett, the founding and longtime president of the WMC, was born to a wealthy family in Kentucky and single-handedly raised the funds necessary to open the Scarritt Bible and Training School in 1892. Lily Hammond, the architect behind much of the WMC policy on race relations, attended a prestigious girls' school in Brooklyn before marrying the son of a slaveholding family who became a Methodist minister and college president. Though there is less biographical information for the membership roles, there is some evidence that members were more likely to be middle class than not. Until the Great Depression required a shift in policy, members were required to pay \$2.40 in annual dues and make contributions to the Conference Expense Fund and the Retirement and Relief Fund.<sup>6</sup> Local auxiliaries were more often found in larger towns and cities. Though auxiliaries did exist in rural areas, WMC leaders often reported these chapters struggled with membership and activity.

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<sup>4</sup> Morris L. Davis, *The Methodist Unification: Christianity and the Politics of Race in the Jim Crow Era*, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 5-8.

<sup>5</sup> John Patrick McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South: The Woman's Home Mission Movement in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1886-1939* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 3.

<sup>6</sup> "Thirteenth Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council" (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1923), 330.

As middle-class white women, members of the WMC do not feature in important recent works on the southern social gospel movement. In *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution*, Joe Creech explores the complex relationship between populism and evangelicalism, arguing that southern Populists were able to pull from the more liberal elements of their religion to justify many of their stances on labor and capitalism. The social gospel, with its demand for material, temporal economic and social justice, faced stiff resistance from traditional evangelicals whose conservatism, Joe Creech argues, was “entrenched in the centers of political, economic, and cultural power in most of the South” and “sacralized the status quo.”<sup>7</sup> *Righteous Indignation* provides a useful examination of how activists appropriated facets of evangelicalism to give credence to their work.

Jarod Roll provides an examination of the religious based labor activism in his study of small farmers in southeast Missouri in the early twentieth century. In *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South*, Roll narrates how black and white farmers banded together to argue that their labor on the land gave them a biblical right to land ownership and control of their own lives and labor. Though focused on Missouri, Roll’s tale speaks to the problems permeating the South in this time – the search for ever cheaper labor in the face of the real, material needs of the laborers. Furthermore, Roll argues that the Missouri farmers are part of the lineage from the early labor movement to the traditional civil rights era. *Spirit of Rebellion* provides insight into labor based civil rights activism and an alternative Christian theology that elevated the rural farmer to something more than a laborer.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Joe Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), xix.

<sup>8</sup> Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South*, *The Working Class in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

*The Gospel of the Working Class: Labor's Southern Prophets in New Deal America* sits at the intersection of labor, civil rights, and religion. Authors Jarod Roll and Erik Gellman focus on two radical preachers, Claude Williams and Owen Whitfield, who shared the social gospel and advocated for the labor movement in the 1930s and 1940s. Though not specifically about the fight for civil rights, Gellman and Roll's biography of these two men make it clear how labor activism often bridged the lines of race, forging important ties between race and class. Williams was white and Whitfield was black, but their common class backgrounds in the extremely poor South gave them a common purpose that trumped any unease about the other's race. Using their "applied religion" as a conviction, Williams and Whitfield mobilized the poor working class by telling them that God expected them to demand the wealth they deserved, specifically through labor activism and unions.<sup>9</sup>

These works on working-class activism fail to account for how women such as those in the WMC could fit into a southern social gospel narrative. These scholars examine many of the same issues that Methodist women were concerned with, including race relations, labor conditions, wages, and hours. Yet the women of the MECS certainly did not fit into the world of Claude Williams and Owen Whitfield, interracial unions, and labor strikes.

The examination of the WMC's role in welfare work and political mobilization contributes to an important corrective to the historical narrative that would exclude or diminish women's role in the social gospel. Though commonly held definitions of the social gospel have not explicitly excluded women from the movement, historians have often failed to explicitly acknowledge or examine women's presence.<sup>10</sup> The editors of *Gender and the Social Gospel*

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<sup>9</sup> Erik S. Gellman and Jarod Roll, *The Gospel of the Working Class: Labor's Southern Prophets in New Deal America*, Working Class in American History (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> The widely accepted definition of the social gospel was established by C. Howard Hopkins: C. Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940);

found that this failure “only reinforced the tradition of overlooking women that characterizes the movement’s predominant narratives.” This study helps fulfill the editors’ call for more primary research to better understand women’s involvement in the movement and how gender issues affected their efforts.<sup>11</sup> The WMC’s intrusion into industry and race relations brought their work to the attention of men, often resulting in backlash and attempts to control the women’s efforts. The authors of *Gender and the Social Gospel* found that recent scholarship suggests women and men found decidedly different roles in the social gospel movement. “Women presumed responsibility for social conditions that affected women, children, and family life,” they explained, while, “Men dutifully maintained oversight of industrial, political, and theological concerns. Women rarely ventured to tamper with these male prerogatives, except when they perceived and could demonstrate that the well-being of women, children, or the family was at stake.”<sup>12</sup> Yet women of the WMC interfered time and again in industry and politics for the very reason that they did impact women, children, and the family. The women deftly managed to maintain relatively autonomous control of their organization, despite not having lay voting rights within the Methodist Episcopal Church, South until 1918. By publishing literature specifically for women and the grassroots organizing of women into local chapters, the Woman’s Missionary Council managed to create and maintain a broad and influential network of female activists throughout the South.

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Hopkins based his definition of the social gospel partly on one produced earlier by Shailer Matthews. However, in Hopkins’s published works, he omits Matthews’s inclusion of the “state” and “family” in the reach of the social gospel. This omission occurs in Ronald C. White Jr. and C. Howard Hopkins, eds., *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976); Ronald C. White Jr., *Liberty and Justice for All: Racial Reform and the Social Gospel* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990); Edwards and Gifford argue that “This omission could serve only to reinforce inattention to family and related political and legal issues in subsequent social gospel scholarship, especially given the dependence of other scholars upon these works: Edwards and Gifford, *Gender and the Social Gospel*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Edwards and Gifford, *Gender and the Social Gospel*, 3–4.

<sup>12</sup> Edwards and Gifford, 4.



In addition to the literature on the social gospel, this dissertation also intersects with studies of the New Deal. Because of their consistent support of New Deal policies, the women of the WMC do not fit in comfortably with scholarship on middle- and upper-class southern opposition to the New Deal. Elizabeth Fones-Wolf and Ken Fones-Wolf, in *Struggle for the Soul of the Postwar South: White Evangelical Protestants and Operation Dixie*, describe how southern industrial leaders resented the expansion of federal authority. They fought against the inroads made by labor through New Deal policies, working to keep wages low and squash unions.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Anthony J. Badger in *New Deal/New South*, argues that politicians and leaders found that the legislation after 1936 went beyond providing emergency relief and represented federal interference. Badger writes, “The rural, small-town elites who dominated so much of southern politics saw traditional patterns of paternalism, deference, and dependence threatened; welfare programs and union organization seemed to undermine employer control in the workplace; welfare and rural poverty programs challenged the customary dominance of landlords and merchants over tenants and sharecroppers.”<sup>14</sup> These policies imperiled the economic, social, and political status quo in the South.

Alison Collis Greene applies this interpretation of New Deal opposition to the major Protestant churches in the South. In *No Depression in Heaven: Religion and the Great Depression in the Mississippi Delta*, Greene argues that leaders in the Methodist church and other prominent southern denominations initially supported New Deal policies, but that support gave way once the men realized how thoroughly the government would interfere in southern life.

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<sup>13</sup> Ken Fones-Wolf and Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf, *Struggle for the Soul of the Postwar South: White Evangelical Protestants and Operation Dixie*, Working Class in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 19–25.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony J. Badger, *New Deal/New South: An Anthony J. Badger Reader* (Fayetteville: Univ. of Arkansas Press, 2007), 59.

Like the women, men also realized their churches, normally the primary source of charitable aid, could not meet the extensive need caused by the Great Depression. But ultimately, they rewrote that narrative for themselves, erasing the memory of churches that “faltered in the face of suffering.” Once religious men realized how seriously the New Deal threatened their position and the system of white supremacy, “those who suffered the least in the Great Depression’s darkest years chose to pretend that no one had really suffered all that much, that there was no need for the federal government to step into a world so self-sufficient and serene that ‘we didn’t know we was poor.’”<sup>15</sup>

Methodist women were of the same class and religion as the subjects of these works, yet they did not share their opposition to the New Deal. Their gender, and the unique opportunities that came with feminized charitable work over the previous decades, meant Methodist women saw in the New Deal the opportunity to create a welfare state. Unlike industrial leaders, politicians, and clergy, Methodist women did not have the economic, social, and political standing to lose. By the 1930s, Methodist women were already well educated on the issues facing poor and working-class southerners. Like their male counterparts, they saw the need for immediate, emergency relief from the federal government. But unlike many men, the women saw the more controversial policies of the New Deal to be solutions to the very problems they had been fighting for decades – low wages and long hours, tenant farming, child labor. Instead of turning their back on the New Deal in order to promulgate their own class and racial standing, the women of the WMC turned to those most in need, throwing their collective political and social capital behind the poor and working class. The WMC supported the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and the Farm Security Administration (FSA), two key components of the New Deal

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<sup>15</sup> Alison Collis Greene, *No Depression in Heaven: The Great Depression, the New Deal, and the Transformation of Religion in the Delta* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 7.

that angered southern conservatives. The WMC's embrace of the same theology as many in the working class – the social gospel – helped the women develop their own understanding of and response to these issues, mitigated, certainly, by their class and race. Rather than use their faith to oppose change and development, the WMC was compelled by their faith, ultimately supporting the same policies pursued by unions and populist activists. The social gospel bridges these two seemingly disparate groups, middle-class white women and working-class activists. This analysis is paramount to understanding how Methodist women could so adamantly support aspects of the New Deal that many men of their same race and class did not.

In fact, Methodist women's support of the New Deal provides evidence for the argument proposed by Kathryn Kish Sklar. Sklar maintains that women like those leading the MECS organizations "were central to the process by which the American social contract was recast and state and federal governments assumed greater responsibility for human welfare." She argues that white women's activism was so crucial to this effort because "it served as a surrogate for working-class social-welfare activism...women were able to provide systematic and sustained grass-roots support for social-welfare programs at a time when the working-class beneficiaries of those programs could lend only sporadic support."<sup>16</sup> The very first years of Methodist women's work in this sphere laid the foundation for the seismic changes they would help bring about. The mobilization of middle-class women "on behalf of legislation to improve the working conditions of wage-earning women," argues Kathryn Kish Sklar, "became an entering wedge for the extension of state responsibility to wage-earning men and to other aspects of women's lives." The WMC had all the components necessary to elicit "fundamental changes in the nation's

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<sup>16</sup> Kathryn Kiss Sklar, "The Historical Foundations of Women's Power in the Creation of the American Welfare State," in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, ed. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York: Routledge, 1993), 44.

polity” – influential and motivated leaders, a large membership, and a concerted and consistent concern for the welfare of working women and children.<sup>17</sup>

A small amount of scholarship has addressed Methodist women specifically, and a few scholars have attempted to place the WMC in the narrative of a southern social gospel. John McDowell’s *The Social Gospel in the South: The Woman’s Home Mission Movement in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1886-1939* provides the most thorough examination of the MECS women’s organizations. His work is a narrative history of southern Methodist women’s work from the founding of a “Woman’s Department” in 1886 through the work of the Woman’s Missionary Council on the eve of the southern merger with the northern branch in 1939. McDowell argues that this examination of the home mission work and of “the religious ideas that informed and were informed by the work further dispels the notion that southern religion has manifested little or no concern with social reform.”<sup>18</sup> Tracing the bureaucratic structure and leadership of the woman’s organization in its various forms, McDowell moves topically between different issues in which the women engaged, chronicling the development of the women’s focus from exclusively the “home” to more public issues of social reform. Central to this narrative is McDowell’s argument that the social gospel was a key part of the women’s reform efforts. Though he never unpacks the social gospel or the women’s particular interpretation of it, McDowell spends a considerable amount of time discussing how the women balanced a concern for people’s material well-being with a concern for their soul. He writes “distinction between the spiritual and social spheres, so precious to much of southern religion, including Methodism, and so embedded in its history, was antithetical to these southern women’s ideas.” The women embraced a brand of social Christianity in which physical and material needs should be

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<sup>17</sup> Sklar, 50.

<sup>18</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 3.

considered side by side with spiritual ones. Though certainly in the business of saving souls, southern Methodist women also believed in saving the “nature and form of the kingdom itself,” arguing that Christian atonement “provided the foundation for the redemption of the social order.”<sup>19</sup>

McDowell’s top-down approach and his reliance on narrative over analysis leaves many unanswered questions, not least of which is an analysis of what it means that these women were influenced by the social gospel. At times, McDowell seems to conflate the social gospel with social concern, depicting an organization that pursued physical aid and spiritual salvation because they were both the spheres of good Christian women. Rather, the WMC fundamentally believed that only men and women whose physical needs were met could be expected to find faith. The present work more carefully examines how these women understood their work to be intimately tied to a spiritual and physical realization of the kingdom of God, rather than just as Christian charity.

In addition, McDowell fails to consider the women as political actors, focusing on their direct action rather than their political activism. As a result, the New Deal is almost entirely missing from his narrative. He mentions only briefly that the women supported the legislation. In fact, the New Deal was a vital realization of the women’s long commitment to women and children and their role in the creation of a welfare state. Through a more thorough examination of how the women came to support New Deal policies and then to work actively to help pass them, this research places the WMC in a larger network of women working for the welfare state.

Ellen Blue sought to remedy some of the issues in McDowell’s *The Social Gospel in the South* in her work, *St. Mark’s and the Social Gospel: Methodist Women and Civil Rights in New*

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<sup>19</sup> John Patrick McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South: The Woman’s Home Mission Movement in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1886-1939* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 23–24.

*Orleans, 1895-1965*. Her in-depth analysis of the work in New Orleans offers a useful case study of one of the longest-running and most extensive home missions run by Methodist women. Blue finds that though McDowell astutely noted “that the MECS women were driven both by theology and by culture, the actual relationship between the two factors and the ability of theology to trump even cultural expectations has not previously been carefully examined.” In addition, Blue places the New Deal solidly in the narrative of Methodist women’s involvement in the social gospel, arguing that this is vital to a more accurate understanding of the decline of the social gospel. Blue argues that the work of southern Methodist women “calls for a serious reshaping of how the Social Gospel has been understood” and “shows that the work of the Social Gospel remained in full swing in the 1920s.” Blue contends that the social gospel only began to decline once the federal government took over much of the work previously the purview of private sector charities and volunteers through the New Deal.

In two book chapters, Mary E. Frederickson analyzes the development of Methodist women’s work on industrial reform and race. “Shaping a New Society: Methodist Women and Industrial Reform in the South, 1880-1940,” published in *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition* by Mary E. Frederickson, discusses how southern Methodist women defied powerful southern industrial interests to envision an “alternative New South: an industrial society run by men and women in the name of God.” Like McDowell, Frederickson notes how the women progressed from relief work to actual activism, embracing the issues of child and women’s labor as some of the most pressing of their day. Frederickson argues that the women formed alliances with other, sometimes non-religious, women’s groups, both to increase the strength of their message and to consolidate their power within the Methodist Church. Frederickson provides important background through her focus on industrial

reform. However, she gives the New Deal a cursory treatment at best, an unfortunate oversight in her mission to “examine the role of Methodist women as critics and reformers of industrial development.”<sup>20</sup> Her discussion of the women’s successes and failures leaves room for more analysis on the import of the social gospel to this issue.

Another book chapter by Frederickson, “‘Each One is Dependent on the Other’: Southern Churchwomen, Racial Reform, and The Process of Transformation, 1880-1940,” considers the relationship between the women of the MECS and the African American activists in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (CME).<sup>21</sup> Frederickson makes a novel argument that CME women used a “process of transformation” which “converted their concerns about the economic and social conditions faced by black southerners into a format that was accessible but not threatening to white women.”<sup>22</sup> McDowell writes of the white women’s “condescension” often present in their work on race relations, but Frederickson adds nuance to that relationship, describing an agency and awareness on behalf of the CME women that is altogether missing from McDowell’s work. I apply the “process of transformation” on a larger scale in order to explain how some WMC leaders became discontent with the race work being done by their organization and began collaborating outside of the church in order to create change.

Because of their class background, the women of the WMC had little direct experience with the very issues they sought to remedy. The WMC relied heavily on the first-hand reports of deaconesses and other laity leaders to educate members on the most pressing issues. One of the

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<sup>20</sup> Mary Frederickson, “Shaping a New Society: Methodist Women and Industrial Reform in the South, 1880-1940,” in *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. Hilah F. Thomas, Rosemary Skinner Keller, and Louise L Queen, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 345–46.

<sup>21</sup> Mary E. Frederickson, “‘Each One Is Dependent on the Other’: Southern Churchwomen, Racial Reform, and the Process of Transformation, 1880-1940,” in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 296–324.

<sup>22</sup> Frederickson, 297.

most vital components of Methodist women's work were the deaconesses, highly trained lay women who were commissioned to specific communities in both urban and rural areas. Deaconesses provided the most direct connection to the working-class people the WMC sought to help, and their reports provided important fodder for the WMC's publications. They were assigned to rural districts, mill towns, mining camps, and industrial centers in towns and cities. Deaconesses usually ran Wesley Houses, the Methodist version of the northern settlement house. Lois E. Myers provides insight into what was accomplished by deaconesses, particularly in rural areas, in her book chapter, "'You Got Us All a-Pullin' Together': Southern Methodist Deaconesses in the Rural South, 1922-1940."<sup>23</sup> Myers examines the forty-eight rural deaconesses and home missionaries that the WMC sent to work in rural farm and industrial towns. These women were often the only representatives of the Methodist Church to live in these places, and they worked with some of the most destitute people in the South. As the only officially recognized Christian vocation for women in the MECS, deaconesses provide "clues for understanding the gendered context of church missions, the religious motivations behind women's dedication to missionary service, and the ways the WMC encouraged, educated, and equipped women for missionary service."<sup>24</sup> The deaconesses were an important step towards full laity and clerical rights for women, and they contributed to the success of the WMC's activism in these years. The present work builds on Myers's in order to place the deaconesses more solidly in the WMC's larger work, outlining how the WMC relied on deaconesses not only to provide charitable aid but to give first-hand insight on the realities that working-class people faced.

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<sup>23</sup> Lois E. Myers, "'You Got Us All a-Pullin' Together': Southern Methodist Deaconesses in the Rural South, 1922-1940," in *Work, Family, and Faith: Rural Southern Women in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Melissa Walker and Rebecca Sharpless (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 166-201.

<sup>24</sup> Myers, 168.



WMC leaders wrote prolifically on a great variety of subjects, sending multiple pamphlets each month to local auxiliaries for use in their meetings, often with a bibliography at the end to encourage further study. Their publications were rich with the reports of deaconesses, statistics, and quotes from other organizations tackling similar issues. Leaders expected that, once armed with this information, auxiliaries could then study their local communities. “Not *every* plan promoted...could be carried out in *every* society,” acknowledged one WMC leader, “but in every society some *one* or *more* plans could have been effective.”<sup>25</sup> Auxiliaries investigated, among other things, wages and work hours for local women, how much money their local government invested in both black and white schools, and what kind of healthcare was available to the poorest in their communities. In this way, members could see that issues were not just national concerns but local ones and would, hopefully, be better motivated to act. The reports of local auxiliaries and conferences, the reports of deaconesses, and the abundant publications of the WMC publishing house provide the bulk of primary sources for this research.

Though the activism of southern Methodist women has been examined in a small slice of the literature, they have clearly never been integrated into the larger narrative of activism in the South. The current scholarship does not adequately explain how a form of the social gospel influenced the women, nor how their understanding of this theology led them to a profound commitment to a welfare state. The MECS women are a part of the legacy of the New Deal, but they add nuance to a narrative that would consign them to opposition based on faith, class, and race. The women of the WMC sit at the intersection of class, gender, race, and religion, and their story, told in parts in the literature, has not been examined within the larger currents of southern culture and change.

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<sup>25</sup> “Twenty Second Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 109.

Chapter one examines how the creation of the WMC led Methodist women to embrace their political power both within and outside the church. Despite their fierce opposition, the two foreign and home mission societies for women were forced into a joint venture, the WMC, in 1910. This struggle awakened Methodist women to their precarious position within the church, and they undertook a long campaign to wrest laity voting rights out of the male leadership. The women eventually applied the lobbying tactics they used to win male leaders' votes to the larger political sphere, using their collective strength to pressure for legislative reform. After winning suffrage in 1920, Methodist women added the vote to their arsenal of political tactics. This chapter provides important background on the strategies the women used for a variety of issues discussed in other chapters.

Chapters two and three trace the development of WMC attitudes toward a welfare state. Chapter two concerns the WMC's long history of work for child welfare. Without the consistent care of parents, deprived of healthcare and education, and often forced into the factory themselves, children were the casualties of a rapidly industrializing South. In addition to other efforts to improve children's lives, the WMC worked consistently for child labor legislation. Eventually, the WMC concluded that working-class parents were incapable of adequately caring for their children, both due to circumstances and choice, and the federal government – not the church – should take on the role of managing family welfare. Chapter three deals with WMC efforts in the white rural South, primarily their desire to reform tenant farming. The women feared those in rural areas would be tempted away from their land and into the factory. Influenced by the teachings of New Conservationism, the WMC sought reforms that would keep tenant farmers and small landowners on their land. However, these problems seemed

insurmountable, and thus, the WMC enthusiastically supported New Deal policies that would aid farmers in tangible ways.

Chapter four examines how fully the social gospel permeated the WMC's activism, causing them to split with others of their denomination and class. Like other early twentieth century reformers, the WMC saw the conversion and Americanization of immigrants as paramount. However, the WMC's efforts, suffused with the social gospel, contained little of the hysteria and suspicion of other southerners. Chapter four analyzes WMC missions among immigrant communities to demonstrate how the women valued a more pluralistic society, placing them at odds with the nativist teachings of the Ku Klux Klan and others.

Chapter five addresses WMC work with black women to address problems of race relations and black oppression. Though the women of the WMC began the decade viewing black women as charity cases, they ultimately came to consider them partners in their efforts to alleviate the problems the black community faced. As a result of more direct collaboration with black women, the white Methodist women were crucial supporters of the creation of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation women's department. But it was their involvement in anti-lynching campaigns in the 1930s that forced white women to face their own complicity in black inequality and discrimination. They fiercely opposed the forced segregation of black churches under the unification agreement in 1939, setting them up to be important allies in the fight for civil rights in the post-WMC world.

When the main northern and southern branches of Methodism rejoined in 1939 and the WMC was subsumed into this new denomination, many of the issues previously paramount to Methodist women faded in importance. The changes wrought by World War II, combined with the new priorities of a truly national denomination, meant that child labor, tenant farming, and

immigrant workers simply did not have the same urgency as they had in the decades prior.

Chapter five traces the development of WMC attitudes towards blacks over the course of forty years and explains why this issue, more so than any other, survived as a topic of supreme importance for Methodist women well after the merger.

## Chapter One

“A crude and radical plan of readjustment and consolidation.” The Origins of the WMC and the

### Awakening of Women’s Political Power

Though they had been largely mute on the issue for decades, the WMC finally addressed woman’s suffrage at the WMC annual meeting in 1919. In her presidential address, Belle Bennett introduced the subject, saying, “Another great forward movement, with almost a century of propaganda, prayer, and struggle behind it, is nearing its consummation.” It had been fifty years, she told her members, since Wyoming had given women the right to vote, and since then half the states had conferred the right to vote for the presidency to women. Bennett seemed comfortable to officially introduce the topic of suffrage once it was a foregone conclusion. “The leaven has worked slowly,” she said, “but may we not confidently expect that another Congress will witness the national enfranchisement of the women of this entire country?” It was though Bennett finally felt emboldened to speak of suffrage now that church laity rights for women had been won. Her address continued:

Again, this good year 1918-19 will long be memorable in the history of Southern Methodism as the time in which the Conferences of the Church, at home and abroad, by an overwhelming vote gave women full membership in the Church. For seventy-five years they had served as its handmaidens, supported its institutions, and worshiped at its altars as minors. They had no voice in its councils and no lawful place in its Conferences. Appeal after appeal for justice and release from this bondage had been made to its great representative body, the General Conference, but only to receive a negative answer... We sit together today in this Council for the first time with all the privileges and rights of laymen by reason of this legal membership in the Church whose name we have so long borne.<sup>1</sup>

Bennett’s address clearly tied together these two issues – woman’s suffrage and women’s laity rights. Though the WMC had not worked for suffrage like other women’s volunteer

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<sup>1</sup> “Eighth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN, 1918), 67.

organizations, now that they had secured their rights within the church, they looked forward to embracing the opportunities that voting would provide.

For over thirty years, missionary women in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South fought against their subjugation and control by male leaders of the church. In 1906, the male leaders of the church recommended combining the women's foreign and home mission societies and bringing the new organization more firmly under the control of the male Board of Missions. Despite women leadership's best efforts to combat a move they viewed as underhanded and against the wishes of missionary women, the Board passed the measure in 1910, creating the Woman's Missionary Council. Their ultimate failure to prevent the creation of the WMC convinced the women to embark on a new struggle for women's laity rights. For almost a decade, the WMC lobbied men's votes to give women voting rights and representation within the church body. Methodist women's struggle to maintain their missionary independence awakened many women leaders within the MECS to their precarious position, their limited authority within the church and subordination to the men.

Despite these years of struggle within their denomination, the Woman's Missionary Council remained silent on the issue of woman's suffrage, choosing instead to focus all their political and social capital within the church on laity rights. Yet after the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment was passed in 1920, women's right to vote was critical to the WMC's efforts. This contradiction in how the WMC prioritized voting rights – doggedly pursuing that right within the MECS but ignoring it for the nation – is indicative of how their experience within the church informed their strategies in the public sphere and vice versa. Fearful that public support of suffrage would cause a backlash against their bid for laity rights, the women stayed mum. Yet the lessons they learned from their efforts to lobby male church leaders' votes directly influenced their efforts in local,

state, and federal politics. Their struggle within the church led them to claim new political authority in the public sphere. Determined to see their welfare agenda come to fruition, the women moved beyond charitable aid to advocacy for legislative reform. Both before and after the passage of woman's suffrage in 1920, Methodist women utilized the tools available to women of their race and class in this time period – lobbying and pressure politics.

The story of the WMC's entrance into politics and government is also an intensely spiritual one. This chapter tells the two-sided narrative of how Methodist women embraced political power within their denomination and within their society. But these two stories – one spiritual and one secular – were intimately bound together. By succeeding in winning political rights within the church, the women would be better able to enact their welfare agenda at the local, state, and federal level. Yet all their political activities in their communities and nation were motivated by their faith and their consistent desire to share that faith with the lost. Their commitment to women, children, and working people was a commitment to the social gospel, the belief that God's Kingdom could be established on earth through the spiritual and physical salvation of the social order. The WMC believed that only through relief of oppression and want – better schools, safer factories, higher wages – could the lost be brought to faith.

The examination of the WMC's political mobilization contributes to an important corrective to the historical narrative that organized women's political activism diminished following the nineteenth amendment. Historians point to the failure of a "woman's bloc" of voters to enact legislation or elect officials that reflected the interests of women. Thus, the unique power organized women held prior to suffrage to pressure politicians was lost, ironically, once women were political insiders. However, Nancy Cott argues against this binary view of pre- and post-1920, criticizing historians for focusing too heavily on 1920 as a benchmark. This

focus, Cott argues, “obscures the similarities in women’s political behavior before and after it and the relation of that behavior to broader political and social context.” A woman’s bloc after 1920 implies a woman’s bloc before 1920, and this simply was not the case. Women organized in impressive numbers, but they did so around particular ideas and issues that reflected ideology, class, and race. Lorraine Gates Schuyler, in *The Weight of Their Votes: Southern Women and Political Leverage in the 1920s*, found that not only did women’s exercise of their right to vote make a difference in southern politics, men treated them with new respect, adding them to campaign staffs and lobbying directly in their organizations. “As suffragists had long expected,” Schuyler argues, “voting rights gave organized women new political leverage.”<sup>2</sup> This chapter demonstrates how the WMC – an organization made up of white, typically middle class, Methodist Christian women – maintained a consistent commitment to lobbying for welfare legislation throughout its existence, adding evidence to Cott’s argument. After 1920, Methodist women happily added voting to their existing arsenal of political strategies.<sup>3</sup>

Methodist women spent decades convincing the men of the church that they had a role to play in home mission work and that they did not need their approval to do it. These hard-fought battles over the course of thirty years help explain the approach the women took to political power both in and outside the church. As this narrative will show, the women constantly faced resistance from male, and sometimes female, members of the church, who wished to place limits on what the women could do and who could approve it. As the fight for suffrage gained ground in the country in the early 1900s, a similar yet separate battle raged in the MECS as Methodist women fought for recognition and rights. This chapter first explains this narrative of how and

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<sup>2</sup> Lorraine Gates Schuyler, *The Weight of Their Votes: Southern Women and Political Leverage in the 1920s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 2–3.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy F. Cott, “Across the Great Divide: Women in Politics before and after 1920,” in *Women, Politics, and Change*, ed. Louise A. Tilly and Patricia Gurin (Russell Sage Foundation, 1990), 154–55.



why Methodist women fought for rights within the MECS and secondly, how this fight informed their political engagement to bring about a new welfare state.

Methodist women's commitment to home mission work had a long history in the church. Though women were involved in missions throughout the 1800s, the first organized women's organizations in the MECS began in the 1880s. In 1878, the General Conference, the male-only, policy-making body of the church that met every four years, established the Woman's Board of Foreign Missions. Eight years later, the General Conference established a second women's organization, the Woman's Department of Church Extension under the male-controlled Board of Church Extension. The Woman's Department, created to raise funds for the building and repairing of parsonages, was the first organized foray into home missions. The Woman's Department's first general secretary, Lucinda Helm, was not content with building parsonages, however. Despite opposition from both men and women within the church, she succeeded in persuading the General Conference to change the Department into the Woman's Parsonage and Home Mission Society in 1890. The Society gave the women increased autonomy and access to a broader array of issues.<sup>4</sup>

With this new charge from the General Conference, the Society began working to improve the welfare of the poor and marginalized. Within the first decade, the Society had established schools for the children of Cuban immigrants in Florida, poor mountain children in rural Kentucky, and for orphans in Tennessee. They expanded quickly to help "people different from themselves." "With a concerned, if parochial and guarded outlook," writes historian Mary Frederickson, "they began to minister to those they considered the 'heathen' of the South: blacks, mountaineers, rural people, and foreign immigrants who came to the region in pursuit of work

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<sup>4</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 7–12.

around the turn of the century.” The first leaders and members of this organization knew immediately which groups they wanted to help, and they moved quickly to form associations to provide spiritual and physical aid.<sup>5</sup>

The central issue of this early work was not finding issues to support. Rather, the women struggled to convince other women that the work was needful. Though the Home Mission Society was established just a few years after the Woman’s Board of Foreign Missions, the closeness of the dates belies the tension surrounding these events. Foreign missions had long been the preferred focus of southern Methodists. Methodist ministers, laymen, and churchwomen devoted to foreign missions resisted the creation of a home mission organization. They worried home missions would funnel funding away from foreign missions. But foreign work was also less of a threat than missions focused on local problems. As historian Mary Fredrickson put it, “If southern Christians’ attention was directed toward the alleviation of poverty and disease in China or India, it was easier for them to ignore the needs of mill workers in Macon or the unemployed in Atlanta.”<sup>6</sup> By succeeding in the creation of this more independent, expansive home mission organization, Lucinda Helm and her supporters laid claim to issues far beyond those of parsonages in disrepair.

The early years of home mission work were largely devoted to increasing support and membership. Lucinda Helm and a small number of other prominent leaders worked diligently to persuade women of the MECS that the work was worthwhile. Central to this effort was their belief that women needed to learn more about their own communities. They started a monthly periodical, *Our Homes*, in 1892 to feature their work and the issues they viewed as critical. The

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<sup>5</sup> McDowell, 12; Frederickson, “Shaping a New Society: Methodist Women and Industrial Reform in the South, 1880-1940,” 349.

<sup>6</sup> Frederickson, “Shaping a New Society: Methodist Women and Industrial Reform in the South, 1880-1940,” 348.

Society recommended reading courses for their members so that they could better understand their country, both the issues it faced, and the work being done to address them. Lily Hammond, an important leader for the Society and later the WMC, put together the first reading course in 1894. She recommended books by prominent leaders of the emerging social gospel movement, including Josiah Strong's *Our Country* and Washington Gladden's *Applied Christianity*. She wrote in the announcement of the course in *Our Homes*, "We want to know of everything that is being done in all the world to uplift the fallen, to better the condition of the poor, to bring classes together, to make straight paths for stumbling feet, whether the work be for the physical, mental, or spiritual betterment of those who need it." Despite these efforts, in 1898 the Home Mission Society had just 15,000 members, a tiny fraction of the 700,000 or so women members of the MECS.<sup>7</sup> Even so, these first years of women's home mission work were a vital foundation for the work that would come.

Nothing pushed women further along their path to political activism than the bitter battle that presaged the creation of the WMC in 1910. In 1898, the Woman's Parsonage Home Mission Society successfully petitioned the General Conference to rename their organization the Woman's Home Mission Society, dropping the word that had so defined the limits of their work. The women were also able to replace their Central Committee with a Woman's Board of Home Missions, a body that included general officers and representatives from each conference. This was an unprecedented amount of independence from the General Conference, as the Woman's Home Mission Society was governed by an all-female Board representing the full reach of their conferences.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 13–15.

<sup>8</sup> McDowell, 12.

This independence was not to last. In 1906, the all-male Board of Missions and the College of Bishops recommended that the two women's societies be united and brought more firmly under the control of the Board of Missions. Ostensibly, the men desired to bring the various mission work done by the church more closely together. Regardless of this stated intent, however, nothing could change the fact that they were attempting to do this without discussing it with the women. The women in the Home Mission Society learned of this recommended change from press reports released a few days before the General Conference. Fortunately, the women were already gathered at their own annual conference, and they quickly voted to send their president, Belle Bennett, and general secretary, Tochie MacDonell, to the General Conference. The two women joined their counterparts from the Woman's Board of Foreign Missions. Together, they lobbied male delegates to oppose the unification. This was all they could do. As women, they could not serve as delegates themselves, and only with special permission could they address the entire body or speak at committee meetings. In particular, the women pushed back against the suggestion that they be managed by an all-male Board. Bennett and MacDonnell suggested the creation of a board or council that would oversee all missions, composed equally of men and women. When this bill was introduced to the floor, Bennett later recalled, it was "met with a good-humored ripple of laughter."<sup>9</sup>

The women were semi-successful, at least pushing off the decision for another four years. In a typical move for a Methodist General Conference, the men voted to establish a commission to study the issue and report back in another four years with a better method of unifying missions. The commission would not have equal representation but would at least include women, comprised of nine men and four women. By this point, the women had accepted that

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<sup>9</sup> McDowell, 126–27.

union was inevitable. Instead, they hoped to maintain as much independence from the men and the larger church body as possible. They argued that their organizations should maintain their autonomy from the men of the church.<sup>10</sup> Though ostensibly delivered for the members of her organization, Bennett's speeches to her Home Mission Society contained veiled warnings for the men who would be deciding on the women's future. In her 1909 presidential address, she reminded the church that, though the women's home and foreign missions organizations represented less than one-tenth of the church's membership, their collective annual giving of about four hundred thousand dollars equaled nearly two-thirds of the total amount given by the entire church membership. "If I know the minds of the missionary women throughout the field (and I think I do)," said Bennett, "any disturbance of the autonomy of the Woman's Missionary Societies, more especially any annulment of the administrative rights...will bring about such a disturbance of relationships in the Church as Methodism has never known...the decrease in missionary collections will result in nothing short of disaster for the work at home and abroad."<sup>11</sup> Bennett's message to the MECS male membership was clear: interfere with the women's organizations and risk losing substantial financial support for foreign and domestic missions.

The final agreement was a mixed outcome. The two organizations were merged into the Woman's Missionary Council. Local and conference home and mission societies were allowed to remain separate, though at a national level and at their annual meeting, foreign and home met together. A new board of missions oversaw the council, comprised of thirty-nine elected and seventeen *ex officio* members. Fifteen of those were women. Despite this unequal representation, the council did maintain significant autonomy in certain areas. The women retained control over

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<sup>10</sup> McDowell, 127–28.

<sup>11</sup> "Twenty-Third Annual Report of the Woman's Home Mission Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church South" (Nashville: MECS, 1909), 48, <https://archive.org/details/twentythirdannua1909meth/mode/2up>.

raising and spending their own funds, allowing them to continue doing the work as they saw fit, if at times quietly.

Though not completely happy with this plan, the four women who served on the commission endorsed it, fearing that a lack of solidarity would motivate men to propose amendments that would cause more harm to the women. Belle Bennett, president of the Board of Home Missions, grudgingly agreed to support the plan as the best alternative to “complete subordination.” The plan passed without amendments. Despite the endorsement of their leaders, some prominent members of the women’s organizations resigned in protest. The editor of *Our Homes*, Mary Helm, immediately resigned. A medical missionary to China, Margaret Polk, even withdrew her membership from the MECS in protest of how the process was handled. Historian John McDowell found that most of the women leaders “combined public enthusiasm for the new organization with private dismay at what they perceived to be the men’s high-handed tactics.” More than anything, the women felt “genuine concern over the future of their work.”<sup>12</sup>

The struggle against uniting foreign and home mission showed the women how precarious their position was within the church. In a letter to a friend, Bennett described how the constitution for the new Woman’s Missionary Council had been written by the men. The women were only allowed to consider and suggest changes after General Conference had started. “Even then,” she wrote, “a number of suggestions were met with the statement: ‘Bishop \_\_\_\_ won’t stand that.’” The small victories they had won, such as women representation on the Board of Missions, were in reality veiled attempts to placate the women. Bennett pointed out that fifteen

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<sup>12</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 125–30, 146.

women could make little impact on a male-controlled board, adding “the power of the Board is really centralized in the hands of the Secretaries in the Publishing House.”<sup>13</sup>

Frustrated with the limitations of lobbying men’s votes, Bennett and her allies began a campaign to wrest some rights out of the MECS. In 1910, the same year the General Conference would decide the women’s fate, the women’s Board of Home Missions also put forward a memorial asking that the General Conference extend the rights of the laity to women. Laity rights would give women the ability to vote regarding church matters and to be elected as delegates to the General Conference. At heart of this issue was the question of whether women should be in the public sphere. “As Methodist women participated in increasing numbers in large and influential women’s organizations like the Woman’s Home and Foreign Missionary Societies and the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union,” argues historian Jean Miller Schmidt, “men accurately perceived the threat to existing power relationships in the church and beyond.” Though some men supported women’s bid for equal participation in the church’s government bodies, “others fought desperately to retain control, arguing that ruling was the proper sphere of man and expressly forbidden to woman in the Scriptures.”<sup>14</sup> Belle Bennett was clear about the importance of this fight. “To my mind no truer missionary measure has ever emanated from or claimed the attention of our Methodism,” she told members in her 1910 presidential address. “Shrinking from opposition and public contest, we have followed our Leader afar off in this,”

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<sup>13</sup> Virginia Shadron, “The Laity Rights Movement, 1906-1918: Woman’s Suffrage in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South,” in *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 264.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: A History of Women in American Methodism, 1760-1939* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 213.

she chided, “but now that we have obeyed his command to ‘go forward,’ we may not cease nor abate any effort until this work of righteousness is accomplished.”<sup>15</sup>

The women’s organizing machine sprang into action. Mrs. Luke Johnson, the Superintendent of the Department of Literature, was put in charge of disseminating information about the memorial. The women wrote explanations of the memorial for conference publications, printing endorsements by prominent men and women members of the church. They encouraged conference and district societies, city mission boards, and individuals to express their support. Due to Johnson’s work, Bennett felt “every reading man and woman has had an opportunity to get an intelligent conception of the great principle involved.” The 1910 General Conference received 148 memorials, 637 petitions, and hundreds of telegrams in support of women’s laity rights.<sup>16</sup>

Despite their successes getting the message out, Bennett knew this was a battle not yet won. Even before the General Conference had concluded, Bennett told her members, “That this educational work must continue for the next four years, none of us can doubt. There are yet among us and of us many men and women to whom the ‘traditions of men have made the Word of God of none effect,’ and at every mention of a change or advance movement in the Church they shrink back in blind terror, full of a superstitious fear of some awful calamity as a divine judgement.”<sup>17</sup> She was correct. The Committee on Revisals, which considered the women’s petition, issued a majority opinion of nonconcurrence, though members issued two minority

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<sup>15</sup> “Twenty Fourth Annual Report of the Woman’s Home Mission Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church South” (Nashville, TN: Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1934), 39.

<sup>16</sup> “Twenty Fourth Annual Report of the Woman’s Home Mission Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church South,” 39; Shadron, “The Laity Rights Movement, 1906-1918: Woman’s Suffrage in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South,” 267.

<sup>17</sup> “Twenty Fourth Annual Report of the Woman’s Home Mission Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church South,” 40.



reports. Belle Bennett was invited to speak to the Conference in support of the memorial, the first time in the history of the MECS that a woman was allowed to speak at General Conference. She pleaded with the audience to vote for laity rights, assuring them it would not upset the balance of gender power in the church. The memorial lost by a vote of 74 to 188, but the women began to immediately prepare for the next General Conference.<sup>18</sup>

For the next four years, the women focused on lobbying local support for their petition. To build support state by state, they asked each annual conference to appoint a special committee that would evaluate conference opinion on women's laity rights. All in all, this plan was a failure. Many conferences resisted this plan, with some presiding bishops even going so far as to forbid a resolution on such a committee or discussing it at all. Instead, the women turned to the organizations they could control: their own. They sponsored discussions in local missionary societies about the connection between woman's suffrage and world evangelization. They had some success in building state support. By the time the General Conference began in 1914, eleven annual conferences had voiced their support for the memorial.<sup>19</sup>

Even as the women worked to build support for their memorial, their other work continued unabated. But the fact they were still controlled by the men was never far from their minds. The women had not forgotten what had happened to them in 1910. In her annual address to the WMC in 1914, Bennett commended the women for pressing onward, spending the previous three years consolidating and adjusting "without an appreciable loss of members or a decrease in collections." Yet this was so because they had to accept "from a ruling body of lawmakers without a woman in it a crude and radical plan of readjustment and consolidation." At

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<sup>18</sup> Shadron, "The Laity Rights Movement, 1906-1918: Woman's Suffrage in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South," 267-68.

<sup>19</sup> Shadron, 268-70.

their annual conference in 1914, the WMC elected women to represent them at the General Conference. In addition to their laity rights memorial, the women were also concerned about proposed legislation regarding work with young people and children. The Executive Committee issued instructions for how their representatives should respond if the Conference “forces union of the various organizations for young people and children.” If such a travesty was to occur, the representatives were to ask for specific things regarding the reorganization. This underscores how powerless the women were in a mission area that had traditionally been their purview, forced to standby as drastic changes were debated in opposition to their desires. They could only try to mediate the damage.<sup>20</sup>

Though the petition ultimately failed at the 1914 Conference, the debate the petition inspired revealed what exactly the women were fighting against. People on both sides began to make the connection between women’s laity rights and woman’s suffrage. Opponents increasingly employed gendered language about women’s “place” in the church and, by extension, society as a whole. The powerful Council of Bishops issued a statement against women’s laity rights:

We have reason to believe that the demand for this kind of equality is not in harmony with the general sentiment of the women of our Church...we believe, furthermore, that the spirit of this movement is against the view which our people at large have held and still hold in regard to woman’s place in the Church and in society, and that such a step would not, therefore make for the greater efficiency of our Church as a whole in any of the regions occupied by it.

Similarly, Mrs. T.B. King, speaking at the General Conference in opposition to laity rights, presented herself as the representative of “the motherhood of the Church” and urged the men to preserve their manhood against this “suffragette” intrusion. For her part, Bennett downplayed the

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<sup>20</sup> “Fourth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1914), 68, 74.

radicalness of this proposal, pointing out that all other large bodies of Methodism had passed women's laity rights years before without issue. She acknowledged that support for laity rights was not the majority, but she argued that the church should listen to the women leaders who were most actively engaged in the church's mission.<sup>21</sup>

Though Methodist women worked unceasingly for voting rights within their denomination, their relationship with the larger woman's suffrage movement was more complicated. Individual leaders of the WMC supported woman's suffrage. Historian Virginia Shadron found that around 1914, "as southern Methodist women began to acknowledge the connection between their struggle in the church and the political woman's suffrage movement outside, they plainly became more threatening to the forces opposing the memorial."<sup>22</sup> However, the organization as a whole stayed largely silent on the issue of suffrage and the nineteenth amendment. This is especially odd given how vocal they were concerning issues that traditionally intersected with women's organizations, such as child labor, lynching, and rural education. Historian of the WMC John McDowell argues that this silence was due to the WMC's commitment to a similar yet competing issue, that of women's right to vote in the church's deliberative bodies. Opponents argued that women advocating for laity rights within the denomination were, in McDowell's words, "merely an extension of the suffragists." They denied this accusation and claimed voting in church councils was a different issue than voting in the political system. By distancing themselves from the issue of woman's suffrage and separating it from their efforts to extend voting rights to women church members, the WMC avoided alienating those within the church who opposed the suffrage amendment.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Shadron, "The Laity Rights Movement, 1906-1918: Woman's Suffrage in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South," 270-71.

<sup>22</sup> Shadron, 269-70.

<sup>23</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 58 n44.

The women attempted to downplay the connection between their memorial for laity rights and woman's suffrage, but the outcome at the 1914 General Conference was the same as that in 1910. The Committee on Revisals again issued a majority report of nonconcurrence. The Conference voted on a minority report issued by sixteen dissident committee members that would eliminate sex bias in the MECS *Book of Discipline*. This minority report failed 105 to 171. The women were undaunted, however. They had gained 31 votes since 1910, and they saw a path to victory.

Over the next four years, activity was largely centered around the *Laity Rights Advocate*, a publication that was entirely financed by private donations and had no official church sponsorship. Unfortunately, no issues of the *Advocate* appear to have survived. However, extant fragments indicate that "the paper's position was more advanced and more militant than that expressed by the movement's leaders in the regular church press." The fragments also indicate the existence of a Woman's Laity Rights League. In an *Advocate* article reprinted elsewhere, Mary Helm decried the alleged suppression by the church of discussion of the issue in church publications, whether local or national, indicating the need for the *Advocate* in the first place. "Because the league was not willing to air church differences in the secular press," she wrote, "the *Laity Advocate* is being sent out with the prayerful hope that it would reach those not hardened against our appeal for a place in the Church."

By the 1918 General Conference, feelings toward women's laity rights had shifted greatly. The Committee on Revisals' majority report supported the memorial, and the Conference passed it after just thirty minutes of debate. World War I seemed to have had some impact on this change. Paul H. Linn, a former opponent of the memorial, was selected by the Committee to present their report. Linn connected women's laity rights to democracy and

religious freedom, telling the Conference, “We are not going to give the lives and property of this nation to protect democracy from autocracy in civil government and submit like slaves to autocracy in the Church.” Though some holdouts attempted to block the vote on technicalities, the memorial passed 270 to 50 and later gained the needed three-fourths ratification in the annual conferences to make the constitutional change.

Shadron notes several reasons the women were finally successful in 1918. The reorganization of the women’s groups in 1906-1910 was an important catalyst, of course, and it motivated more people, men and women, to work actively for laity rights. But the memorial also passed for the simple reason that the voting body in 1918 was radically different than that in 1910. Shadron found that almost 50 percent of the 320 delegates voting in 1918 were elected to the General Conference for the first time. Only 13 percent of the 156 new representatives voted against suffrage. Though it would be almost impossible to prove, it seems likely that this was a direct result of the women’s resolve that only suffrage-friendly delegates would be elected to the Conference, demonstrating their ability to lobby behind the scenes, since at the time they would not have been allowed to vote on delegates.<sup>24</sup> “That which eight years ago was begun in doubt and fear,” said Belle Bennett, “has been accomplished in a loving fellowship of service.”<sup>25</sup> After almost a decade of struggle, the fight for laity rights was won.

The WMC’s experience within their own denomination compelled them to take a fresh look at their role in the larger society. The forced merger in 1910 awakened them to their perilous position within the church. Charitable aid – so long the purview of women church members – was so easily shaped and controlled by the men, with the women powerless to stop it.

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<sup>24</sup> Shadron, “The Laity Rights Movement, 1906-1918: Woman’s Suffrage in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South,” 272–74.

<sup>25</sup> “Eighth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 67.

At the same time, they saw need in their communities and beyond, and they wanted to mobilize to offer aid. Yet their efforts were limited by the constraints placed on them by their church and their gender. The women commissioned studies of the conditions southerners faced in their homes, work, and schools. “As southern Methodist women probed their society more deeply and accepted greater responsibility for its ‘climate,’” writes Frederickson, “their role became more public. As they began to take political stands on local and regional issues and to move more aggressively into social reform, they adopted the striking motto [in 1910], ‘Grow we must, even if we outgrow all that we love.’”<sup>26</sup> For these women, whose work began in parsonage homes, working exclusively in the homes of the poor and the downtrodden was no longer enough. They would need to enter the political sphere to enact the legislative changes that would provide real and lasting help for people in need. They combatted their vulnerable position within the church by lobbying within the church, working behind the scenes to win votes for their laity rights memorial. Like other women organizers in the early 1900s, the WMC developed similar tactics to pursue their political ends despite not having the vote. The WMC used the collective muscle of its influential leadership and widespread membership to help pass or stop legislation, at the local, state, and national level, despite not having the right to vote.

Pressure politics was a vital tool for women volunteer organizations prior to the nineteenth amendment. Denied the vote, women relied on their collective influence – bolstered by their race and class – to marshal men’s votes instead. This was precisely what Methodist women did to gain laity rights within the church. The women lobbied men’s votes, as that was their only avenue to passing a laity rights memorial. Women had employed these tactics since the early nineteenth century, influencing electoral and legislative politics from the outside. As

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<sup>26</sup> Frederickson, “Shaping a New Society: Methodist Women and Industrial Reform in the South, 1880-1940,” 355.

women and mothers, they held a particular space regarding health, safety, moral, and welfare issues, and brought together in volunteer organizations like the WMC, women maintained a unique position of influence.<sup>27</sup>

Most of the legislation the WMC championed concerned issues that became the foundation of the welfare state. Their commitment to education, mothers and children, industrial labor reform, and public health reflects their embrace of the social gospel. They often framed the need for legislative reform as a necessary step towards spiritual salvation for the working class. This was “more than motherhood and self-interest,” argues Kathryn Kish Sklar. The WMC, like other women’s organizations, looked with increasing anxiety at the changes wrought by industrialization, both to middle-class and working-class life. According to Sklar, “large numbers of middle-class women sought to improve the welfare of working people generally. Work (and its obverse – unemployment) set the framework within which they viewed social problems and posed solutions. Family life and motherhood were part, but only part, of that framework.”<sup>28</sup> Nancy Cott has argued that suffragists were able to build coalitions in the 1910s by acknowledging that women “had variant and perhaps clashing loyalties.” Thus, suffragists changed their messaging depending on what groups they were speaking to in a tacit acknowledgement that “not all women shared the same definition of self-interest.”<sup>29</sup> In a similar manner, the WMC avoided relying on the language of motherhood when appealing to members. If anything, the WMC more commonly employed the language of members’ shared Christian faith and Methodist ideals specifically than that of mothers and wives.

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<sup>27</sup> Cott, “Across the Great Divide: Women in Politics before and after 1920,” 161.

<sup>28</sup> Sklar, “The Historical Foundations of Women’s Power in the Creation of the American Welfare State,” 45.

<sup>29</sup> Cott, “Across the Great Divide: Women in Politics before and after 1920,” 156.

The WMC's commitment to these tactics and to enacting welfare legislation is best exemplified by how they directed their auxiliaries in the 1910s. Throughout the almost 40 years of the WMC's existence, auxiliaries gathered once a month to study the annual yearbook, which the organization sent out at the beginning of each year to outline topics of study, prayer, and chapter business. The WMC provided additional literature to local leadership so they would be prepared to teach the topics and lead discussion. This literature sought to educate members about specific issues, inform them both about what the WMC was already doing to address the issue and what still needed to be done, and tell members what they specifically could do to aid these efforts. The yearbooks even went so far as to direct the auxiliaries on which hymns to sing each month – “carefully selected and [adding] to the devotional and missionary spirit of the meeting” – and to pair specific Bible lessons that reinforced the issues they were discussing.<sup>30</sup> Through the yearbooks, the WMC essentially told members what issues to care about and what legislation to support or to oppose. The WMC had a particularly large focus on commissioning studies of local conditions, and auxiliaries were often directed to enact such studies, report back, and discuss. The yearbooks were a simple yet effective way for the WMC to command their impressive membership rolls in the directions they wished them to go.

This approach to teaching auxiliaries was repeated over and over each month. The May entry in 1915 is a useful example. The topic of study was “The Changing World Our Opportunity – China, Labor Problem,” encompassing both foreign and home mission topics for the meeting. In their study of “The Church and Labor,” the auxiliaries read “A Church and Labor Catechism,” a four-page series of questions and answers that fully integrated the WMC's concern for workers' spiritual and physical wellbeing. The Catechism began by explaining the

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<sup>30</sup> “Yearbook Adult Auxiliaries” (Nashville, TN, 1917), Adult Year Book 1915-1917, Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.



issue: industrialism had caused an alienation of the working class from the church, because the church had turned its back on the working class. Once again, people's spiritual and earthly problems were intimately connected in the eyes of the WMC. The solution was twofold – the church must “remove distinction of classes and find concrete measures by which economic justice and industrial peace can be secured.” The writer then outlined how the church was already responding to the problem, through committees of social service, a general awakening to the evils and dangers of industrial work, and advocacy for new legislation and community aid. Finally, the writer closed with specific directives to the auxiliary members on how they could help:

Obey the divine precept, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." See that study classes of social conditions are instituted in connection with the Church; that the Church enters into fraternal relations with the workingman; that in our assemblies artificial distinctions of class be removed. This the women can do by precept and example.

Ques. Can we do anything in a public way?

Ans. Yes; give publicity to every social and industrial evil and use moral suasion for the enactment of laws which protect or relieve.

“A Church and Labor Catechism” made use of all the WMC’s education tactics: explain the issue, explain how the issue was already being addressed, and close with how the membership could help. Though the directives to members were not incredibly detailed, the message was clear: study local conditions and advocate for new legislation.<sup>31</sup>

The auxiliaries applied what they studied and learned in their meetings to lobbying for legislation at the local, state, and national level. The superintendent of the Bureau of Social Service, Mrs. W. J. Piggott, reported on the diverse legislative efforts across the WMC in her 1916 report on the previous year. This sampling of legislative work demonstrates how the women were committed to the WMC platforms of aid to women, children, education, and

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<sup>31</sup> “A Church and Labor Catechism” (May 1915), 1–4, Adult Year Book 1915-1917, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

industrial labor relief. Members and conferences worked both independently and in conjunction with other women's groups. Many conferences contributed to the National Reform Association's effort to pass the Gillette Anti-Polygamy Bill, while members in Kentucky worked with the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in their bid for prohibition. The women in a mining community protested when the funding for the illiteracy commission was cut. A "small group" petitioned their members of Congress to support the Federal Child Labor Amendment. Kentucky and South Carolina conferences both worked to secure government funding for a home for delinquent girls. North Arkansas and Virginia pushed for better censorship of moving pictures. Oklahoma fought for equal suffrage, a mothers' pension bill, a bill for supervised playgrounds, and an anticigarette measure. The Virginia Conference petitioned lawmakers to pass a minimum wage law for women workers, to raise the age of protection for girls, and to establish police women in Richmond.<sup>32</sup> All of these issues had been addressed in WMC yearbooks and literature. Local chapters and conferences took the teachings of the WMC and applied their lobbying powers to them.

The publications for auxiliaries demonstrate how the WMC embraced the social gospel. Writers argued that social and economic reform was necessary if they could ever expect to save lost souls. An uncredited poem in the May 1915 study on industrialism wrote of the need for "daily bread" – both the "bread of life and bread of labor."<sup>33</sup> Spiritual and earthly sustenance went hand in hand. The 1917 yearbook had a general theme of "the Kingdom of God." This was a common phrase in social gospel circles, to bring the Kingdom of God to earth. The implication was twofold – to create a spiritual Kingdom of believers and an earthly kingdom, where people

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<sup>32</sup> "Sixth Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council" (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1916), 132.

<sup>33</sup> "Yearbook Adult Auxiliaries."

were free from want and oppression. The directive to share the good news with the lost was consistently framed through the need for legislative reform. If the church expected to bring the lost working class back into the fold, they would need to create systemic change first. In months that focused on domestic issues, the auxiliaries studied “the Kingdom of God in legislation.” These months educated members on legislation regarding public health, childhood, industry, and the family. In these seemingly banal topics, the WMC covered many politically and religiously charged topics as eugenics, segregated vice, age of consent, and compulsory health insurance laws. These pamphlets on legislation argued for a variety of laws that would alter the fabric of industry, living conditions, and the structure of the family. The WMC integrated their view of the social gospel into their attitude toward legislation. The writer for the February 1917 literature, “The Kingdom Coming in the Cotton Mills,” wrote, “we have come to realize that the kingdom is a world-wide society in which universal obedience to divine law will bring universal blessing, mental, physical, and spiritual.” The legislation proposed throughout the 1917 yearbook fit into that concept of divine law. Their duty as Christians attentive to the issues of the day was to advocate for “the kingdom our Lord saw – an ideal world, saved with spiritual redemption and physical perfection; a world where men are brought into right relations with each other and to God, where men have justice, equal opportunity, and the great spiritual and ethical purposes of divine law are fulfilled. It is for such an ideal world as this that his followers are to work.”<sup>34</sup>

The authors were creative in their arguments as to why women should be concerned about legislation regarding labor. They took pains to explain why industrial conditions could affect the home and why the state of homes and marriages could affect society, tapping into a decades-old Methodist commitment to home-life and the family. But their messages reshaped

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<sup>34</sup> “The Kingdom Coming in the Cotton Mills” (February 1917), 1, Adult Year Book 1915-1917, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

that commitment to encourage women to look beyond the home and family and to see how issues of health, education, and labor could affect not just the poor but the middle class as well. By couching labor and societal legislation in these terms, the pamphlets attempted to use the women's shared faith to supersede class divisions.

The March study for 1917 demonstrates these efforts to use religious appeals to inspire advocacy for the working class. "We who toil cannot always choose our environment," Francis Dudley argued in "Needed Legislation Regarding Public Health," "but State, county, and city legislation can change it." Dudley discussed three types of disease that had the potential to damage the "temple of the Holy Spirit." He made the case that WMC women, given their social and economic capital, could bring about real change for working people who could not help themselves through legislation. WMC women could combat preventable disease by demanding housing standards on sewage and clean water, laws that controlled occupancy and required street cleaning, and regulations on foodstuffs. Labor laws that restricted working hours and required the use of ventilation and new developments in safety measures would help prevent the thousands of cases of illness, accidents, and deaths caused by industrial disease, pollution, and fatigue. Preventable, industrial, and degenerative diseases could all be assuaged by compulsory health insurance laws, "financed by a percentage of wages from the employee, employer, and the state." Dudley also made an economic case for legislation on public health. Dudley described the millions of working days and dollars lost to the economy due to workers' illness. Dudley wrote, "Not only does this suffering pay the penalty for the carelessness of society, but the illness injures the productive capacity of the country." Dudley rooted the solution to these diseases in labor concerns – better living conditions, more regulation, employer-sponsored health insurance – but the outcomes benefitted more than just the worker. The suggested legislation would result

in more secure family units, healthy purveyors of the holy spirit, and increased economic output. Dudley summarized the conflation of the spiritual and physical in his conclusion, writing, “The questions of health and safeguarding human life are religious ones. It is the function of the Church to unite legislative, social, and religious forces, so to order the world’s work that the bodies of God’s children become the fit dwelling places of the Holy Spirit.” Dudley advocated for fairly radical social and economic reform legislation by appealing to members’ commitment to saving the lost. Healthy workers, safe from the dangers of disease and industrial injuries, were better fit to accept the teachings of the church.<sup>35</sup>

The WMC consistently championed women’s political power in the 1910s, both in their church and outside of it. Methodist women spent almost a decade lobbying for laity rights within the MECS, while using their membership numbers to lobby for legislation. At the same time, women across the United States were working for woman’s suffrage. The WMC did not join that particular fight. There is evidence that individual members or conferences openly supported woman’s suffrage, but there is little mention of the issue in official WMC publications or reports. This well could have been a strategic move, as McDowell argues, to distance themselves from a controversial national issue in order to better position themselves in a denominational one. But once laity rights seemed all but secured, the WMC was more willing to address suffrage and then embrace, as evidenced by Belle Bennett’s 1919 presidential address.

Though the WMC had not openly agitated for suffrage, it did not hesitate to make use of this new right. Committees on legislation formed to encourage their members to vote.

Conferences rallied members to vote for specific candidates or bills. In 1923, the South Georgia conference reported 100 women had voted against a wet candidate. Bertha Newell,

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<sup>35</sup> Frances Dudley, “Needed Legislation Regarding Public Health” (March 1917), 1–8, *Adult Year Book 1915-1917*, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

superintendent of the Bureau of Social Service, reported in 1925 that superintendents of both conferences and local auxiliaries “have been more active than in any previous year in securing an alignment of their women with the forces making for good government.” Conferences reported, “serving on school boards, registering voters, getting out the vote, urging women to pay their poll tax, study of candidates, working for school bond elections, law enforcement, health measures, for park supervisor, for removal of dance halls, for restrictions on moving pictures, for State welfare legislation by work with senators and representatives, for national legislation, for ratification of the Child Labor Amendment, and for the World Court.” A handful of conferences announced work with the League of Women Voters, while some WMC members even ran for local office themselves. The superintendent of one conference served as the police commissioner for her city. Bertha Newell, in a study pamphlet for June 1923, summed up the WMC directive, writing, “Women have been so long accustomed to thinking of the processes of government – elections, law-making, office-holding, and campaigning – as belonging to men exclusively, that it has taken some time for most of us to think of ourselves as having any active part in any of these matters....But the spirit of these times is different.” With suffrage secured, the WMC moved boldly into a new era of political activism.<sup>36</sup>

The voting activities of WMC women did not necessarily fit into a larger “woman’s bloc.” Despite the fearmongering among anti-suffrage activists, women did not vote as a bloc after winning the vote in 1920. Suffragists argued that women deserved to be represented by the vote because their interests and expertise differed from men. Yet they also stressed women’s diversity, their equal citizenship and individuality. Cott argues, “Given the divisions among

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<sup>36</sup> “Thirteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 134, 136; “Fifteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Home Mission Society” (Nashville, TN: The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1901), 127; Bertha Newell, “Faith and the State” (June 1923), 1, *Adult Year Book 1922-1923*, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

women and the nature of the political system, a woman's voting bloc – or even the possibility of a lobbying bloc representing *all* women – must be considered an interpretive fiction rather than a realistic expectation.” Both before and after 1920, women's political activities were influenced by a variety of strategic ideological, class-based, and race-based differences.<sup>37</sup>

The WMC appealed to members' faith and their sex when soliciting their votes. Bertha Newell, who served as the WMC superintendent of the Bureau of Social Service for nearly twenty years, framed members' responsibility to vote and be involved politically as a particularly Christian necessity. In her 1923 pamphlet, “Faith and the State,” Bertha Newell told members that they were “equally responsible” for the government of the nation as their fathers, brothers, and husbands. Newell did argue that women were uniquely suited to work on certain issues, writing, “We believe that there are certain fields in which a woman's instinct and a woman's training and outlook are needed to supplement masculine force and executive ability.” But this was not the general knowledge of womankind; this was the specific training and experience of missionary women. “We, as Church women, have been trying to serve the common good in promoting the Church's program for social welfare,” Newell wrote, “In this battle for purity, justice, and opportunity we have found ourselves opposed to blank walls of indifference in those who should have been our allies.” She gave as an example the failure of federal child labor laws in the Supreme Court. If state laws or new federal legislation were to be passed, “the women of the country are surely the ones to speak in this matter so deeply affecting the home and the future welfare of the mass of our people who labor at wages for bread.” In her 1925 report for the Bureau of Social Service, Newell wrote, “There is a growing conviction that the Church, in the persons of its members, has a right to express itself in collective ways on all matters of

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<sup>37</sup> Cott, “Across the Great Divide: Women in Politics before and after 1920,” 155, 170–71.

government that are humanitarian and calculated to bring about better standards of living and intensify the spirit of brotherhood.” But women brought vital experience to these efforts. Their knowledge and commitment to welfare reform made them essential actors in this fight. “Every woman will need to put forth all her energy and summon all her faith” if they were to create change. Newell pointed to the Sheppard-Towner maternity and infancy bill as an example – passed because of “all the federated woman strength of the country behind it.” When the WMC added voting to their political efforts, the same social gospel suffused this effort as well. They voted as women, but more importantly they voted as Christian women. Neither representing a “woman’s bloc” nor a “Christian bloc,” the WMC pushed for a missionary woman’s bloc.<sup>38</sup>

In the years following the nineteenth amendment, the WMC did not end their lobbying efforts but added suffrage as an important tool in their arsenal. Nancy Cott has found that many historians view 1920 as a watershed after which the voluntarist organizations disintegrated. In these historians’ view, as insiders now in the political process, women, rather ironically, lost political influence, and then failed to replace that power by voting in any large number. Cott argues that by focusing too much on the nineteenth amendment, historians have failed to see the similarities in women’s political behavior before and after 1920. She has found that “this voluntarist mode, with its use of lobbying to effect political influence, and the kinds of interests pursued, prevailed in women’s political participation both before and after [the nineteenth amendment].” By continuing to use their same tactics, organized women helped achieve some notable policy victories, including the Sheppard-Towner Infancy and Maternity Protection Act of 1921.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Newell, “Faith and the State,” 1–3, 5; “Fifteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Home Mission Society,” 127.

<sup>39</sup> Cott, “Across the Great Divide: Women in Politics before and after 1920,” 154, 161; Schuyler, *The Weight of Their Votes*, 5.



The WMC certainly did not disintegrate, and their lobbying efforts continued with great vigor. Conferences pursued local legislation on a variety of issues. In 1923 they reported such work as mothers' pension laws, moving picture regulations, and public sanitation. That same year at the national level, the WMC's Committee on Social Service endorsed the federal child labor law and the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America's proposal that the United States government call a national conference to consider world conditions, particularly the "situation in the Near East, in the endeavor to bring order and peace to the suffering world." They sent their own resolution of support to the president and secretary of state and urged conference societies and auxiliaries to do the same, with the addition of their states' senators and congressmen. In addition, the Committee directed the local social service committees to pursue legislation to raise the standards of treatment of prisoners, to address child labor at the state level, and to address the crisis of lynching. Clearly, their new right to vote did not cause the WMC to ease their commitment to pressure politics.<sup>40</sup>

The value of suffrage was not lost on the women of the WMC. Though they, like many women's organizations prior to the nineteenth amendment, had embraced lobbying and pressure politics to further their agenda, the women acknowledged the limits of such tactics without the support of voting rights. Pressure politics were affective to a point, but nothing changed the fact that the women were beholden to the cooperation of men. Many scholars have argued that organized women, so adept at politics while disenfranchised, failed to adequately corral the collective power of women's vote or even to realize its potential. Lorraine Gates Schulyer, in *The Weight of Their Votes: Southern Women and Political Leverage in the 1920s*, flatly denies this view, instead arguing that a close examination of the Nineteenth Amendment's effects in the

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<sup>40</sup> "Thirteenth Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council," 131, 136, 138, 167–68.

New South “suggests that woman’s suffrage was important not only symbolically but also structurally and substantively.” Prior to 1920, scores of women who fought for prohibition and social welfare policies had concluded that their policy priorities would never be taken seriously until they could vote for them themselves.<sup>41</sup>

The WMC literature supports this argument. Leadership argued that pressure politics should continue, but now with the added benefit of the vote behind it. Newell, in her 1923 publication for the WMC, acknowledged the history of women’s lobbying power: “Women have always had the power of creating sentiment for reform. We still have it, and it is, perhaps, still our greatest power for good government.” But sentiment was not enough to create the kind of the change the women wanted to see. Newell continued, “We must follow up the kind of propaganda that this social service department of the missionary society has always put before the women of the Church by the complete exercise of active citizenship.” She shared an anecdote from “the old days” to prove her point. Women had prepared an extensive petition that city restrictions on open saloons in Chicago be enforced. When a delegation of women presented this “monster petition” with “yards of signatures” to the mayor, “his honor received them with utmost suavity and said, running his finger down the line of signatures: ‘M-m, let’s see how many of these signers are voters!’” Newell summarized the futility of such efforts, ending her anecdote with, “Needless to say the petition that represented so much work and embodied such ardent hopes went into his wastebasket.”<sup>42</sup> The women could and should continue to lobby votes and pressure politicians, but unless they were prepared to back up those efforts with their votes, their work would always be limited.

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<sup>41</sup> Schuyler, *The Weight of Their Votes*, 2, 6–7.

<sup>42</sup> Newell, “Faith and the State,” 3–4.

Other WMC publications showed members what was possible if they used both lobbying and voting in their efforts. *The Winsome Call*, a training manual for new auxiliaries, explained how women might win an election. “Doesn’t that sound too much like politics?” the writer asked. But the facts would speak for themselves as to why elections – and politics – should concern Methodist women. In this example, a southern state legislature passed an act to hold an election to set up a county Agricultural, Breeding, and Racing Commission. The county paper published portions of the Act but left out the part of the Act that said, “if this election were favorable, all previous laws regulating gambling would be automatically repealed.” Supporters of the Act emphasized the advantages of promoting the breeding of fine horses and the new market for farmers’ hay and grain during racing seasons. “It all looked rather innocent,” warned the author, “save that pari-mutuel betting machines were to be introduced.” The local auxiliary sprang into action. Its Christian Social Relations Committee secured permission for the chairman and a member to speak in the eight women’s circles a week before the election. They spoke to 140 women, disclosing the evils in the Act hidden by its promoters. The author explained the outcome, “The circle members promised support of the forces of righteousness. Church people turned out in large numbers and the measure was voted down by an overwhelming majority.”<sup>43</sup> This anecdote shows how women could combine all of their tools – identify issues they viewed as critical, educate women and through them men about the issue, and vote in force for the end they desired.

This work carried over into the large-scale legislative efforts of the New Deal. Increasingly, the leaders of the WMC saw the necessity of federal legislation to intervene where local governments could not or would not act. At the national level, the WMC endorsed such

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<sup>43</sup> Juanita Brown, “The Winsome Call” (nd), 93–94, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

legislation as the Fair Labor Standards Act and the Social Security Act, and leadership worked hard to convince members to support them as well. Publications in the late 1930s, after the Great Depression had ravaged the country, presented the argument for members that local efforts were not always enough. Bertha Newell told members in 1939, “Many people believe that so far as possible the promotion of general welfare should be the task and duty of local units of government – the state, county, town or village – rather than of the national government.” But new developments in the country, from good roads and automobiles to chain stores and the radio, had made “our nation more nearly one great community.” Furthermore, Newell argued, the framers of the Constitution who had originally wrote of “general welfare” had no notion of electricity, hard-paved roads, or railroads. Thus, the government was well within its bounds to enact federal legislation for the good of all people: “[the framers] were limited by the lack of the inventions that have today carried our actual horizons from coast to coast. The horizons of their souls were unlimited. Spiritually, they set no bounds that our Constitution may not cover.”<sup>44</sup> With this argument as her foundation, Newell moved on to explain key New Deal legislation and how it fit into the WMC’s larger views of the welfare state. Later chapters address how and why the WMC advocated for specific New Deal legislation.

The WMC remained vigilant about all areas of legislation. “Listen and look for ways to promote helpful legislation,” the chairman of the Council Committee on Christian Citizenship and Law Observance told auxiliary superintendents in 1939, “Be especially alert to the need for promoting the ‘Federal Aid Bill’ which will be presented to Congress” which would provide aid to rural schools in states that could not meet the financial need. In a later letter, the chairman encouraged auxiliaries to “bring pressure to bear” on the public officials who appointed prison

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<sup>44</sup> Bertha Newell, “Widening Our National Outlook” (June 1939), 3–5, Adult Yearbooks 1933–1939, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

wardens “thus influencing them to choose men who will be just and humane in their treatment of criminals.” She encouraged auxiliary superintendents to order the new Citizenship Packet and circulate it among their members. In 1939 – the last year before the WMC was subsumed into a new woman’s organization as a result of the north/south Methodist merger – their message was the same as it had been the last two decades: lobby for legislation, pressure those in power, and vote.<sup>45</sup>

The WMC’s engagement with the political sphere, and the social gospel that motivated them, suffused all the major efforts they undertook. Though the specific issues were diverse and varied - ranging from regulation of moving pictures to social security laws – the women were consistently concerned with the groups of people they viewed as the most vulnerable to oppression and poverty: immigrants, children, particularly those who labored in factories, rural southerners, and African Americans. They attempted to convert all and sundry. They provided charitable aid, everything from clothing and food to English classes and day cares, to try and provide immediate relief. Yet they also pursued legislation for each of these four groups that would create systemic social and economic reform. This is not to say they were always successful, their motives always pure, or their attitudes toward the people they tried to help always just. But the social gospel taught them that the spiritual without the physical was inadequate, and their experiences in the MECS taught them the charitable without the political was impotent. They carried these lessons with them for the thirty years the WMC existed.

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<sup>45</sup> Thelma Stevens, “To Auxiliary Superintendents of Christian Social Relations,” First Quarter 1939, 2, Adult Yearbooks 1933-1939, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries; Thelma Stevens, “To Auxiliary Superintendents of Christian Social Relations,” Third Quarter 1939, 2, Adult Yearbooks 1933-1939, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

## Chapter Two

### “Into the home, the school, and the street:” Child Welfare, Industrialization, and the Intervention of the State

“The responsibility rests upon us as Southern women,” admonished Bertha Newell, superintendent of the WMC Bureau of Social Service, in 1923, “of seeing that adequate State [child labor] laws are passed.” The WMC had spent over two decades fighting against child labor in the South, placing the women at odds with others of their class, race, and denomination. They were committed to the welfare of children and their families, and child labor represented all that was wrong with greedy industrialists, lax parents, and an indifferent government. After the Keating-Owen Act, a federal child labor law, was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1918, the WMC endorsed a constitutional amendment to give Congress the ability to regulate child labor in 1923.<sup>1</sup>

This commitment to end white child labor legislatively rested heavily on the first-hand experiences of deaconesses and homeworkers among the working-class. In the opening years of the twentieth century, Methodist women spread out across the industrializing South, staffing settlement houses in industrial areas, assisting mill community preachers, and forming cooperative homes for young working women. Historian Mary Frederickson notes that, as Methodist women’s work expanded in the early twentieth century throughout southern cities and to rural and mountain communities, Methodist women were brought “face to face with the ugly realities of an industrializing society.”<sup>2</sup> The reports of these women on the ground confirmed the WMC’s belief that industry was having a devastating effect on the home, and they grew steadily

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<sup>1</sup> “Thirteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 129, 167–68.

<sup>2</sup> Frederickson, “Shaping a New Society: Methodist Women and Industrial Reform in the South, 1880-1940,” 354–55.

more suspicious of working-class families' ability to adequately care for their children. The WMC found many social ills to be rooted in the increasing number of young children working in industrial labor: moral degradation, flagging education, and a separation of children from their families. Methodist women invested time, resources, and study to the abolition of child labor, expansion of public schools, access to healthcare and sanitary living, and opportunities for children to play and develop. The work of deaconesses on the ground motivated the WMC to advocate for legislation that addressed the conditions the deaconesses saw firsthand. The women consistently advocated for child labor legislation to protect children, but they also increasingly looked to the government to regulate children and families' lives.

This chapter traces how the WMC's views of child welfare – who should help families and how – developed over the span of thirty years. Children were the victims of circumstance – misguided parents, greedy industry leaders, and indifferent governments – and the WMC took on all three in their bid to change the futures of children living in poverty. This chapter begins prior to World War I with the work of deaconesses and homeworkers who experienced the evils of industry firsthand through their assignments in settlement houses, cotton mill towns, and factory neighborhoods. Their reports convinced the WMC that industrialization was having an unacceptable impact on children and families, engendering a concern that the family unit was failing. In response, the WMC initially embraced a form of negative eugenics through laws and programs regarding family planning, age of consent, access to marriage licenses, and the institutional care of delinquent and dependent girls. They commissioned studies of cotton mills and mining conditions, encouraging their members to look closely at their own local conditions. Child labor was at the forefront of their minds, but Methodist women were concerned with all aspects of child welfare, including health, education, recreation, and morality. Even when

children did not work, the effects of industry on their families were severe. The WMC viewed families as victims of a capitalist system that exploited their labor. The WMC responded to this issue on two fronts. The WMC deaconesses, home workers, and city missionaries worked on the ground, providing immediate relief and spiritual and physical care for child laborers and their families, their work educating WMC leaders and membership. Though deaconesses often worked directly with owners to run welfare programs, by the late 1910s the WMC was convinced this was not enough. The deaconesses' work made clear that government intervention was needed to legislate who could work, how much they would be paid, and how many hours they could work. The national leadership of the WMC wielded their influence to advocate for government intervention and convince their auxiliary membership to follow suit. Bolstered by the experiences of their deaconesses and home workers, the WMC followed the lead of other child labor reformers in placing their weight behind federal child labor legislation.

In the years surrounding World War I, however, the WMC came to understand child welfare as a much bigger issue than child labor alone. During and immediately following the war, Methodist women grew increasingly suspicious of working-class parents' ability to adequately care for their children. They ultimately concluded that the family unit was rife with moral failings, as a result of the ways industry had changed how parents viewed the roles of children within the family economy. Parents allowed their children to work in factories, placing them in unsafe and morally suspect situations. Thus, Methodist women grew increasingly comfortable calling for institutions – the church, public schools, the government – to step in and take over where they perceived the family unit had failed. “If society would save the child from too great toil and too little education,” went one WMC publication in 1920, “it must follow him



into the home, the school, and the street.”<sup>3</sup> Reversing their earlier course, the WMC shifted to positive eugenics, working to educate women on how to properly care for and raise children, and they increasingly looked to the government for legislation that would step in when the family failed. In advocating for government intervention in people’s personal lives, the WMC broke with their fellow southerners who had long believed welfare efforts should be the exclusive purview of schools, church, and industry.<sup>4</sup> In an increasingly industrializing American South, the family could no longer be trusted to exclusively provide the physical, spiritual, and moral care for the nation’s children.

The WMC’s belief in the necessity of government intervention reached its logical conclusion in the 1930s with their support for the New Deal. Disappointed by the failure of industrialists and parents to do right by children, the WMC supported legislation in the 1930s that fundamentally changed the role of the government in the welfare system. Many historians have examined the response of southern leaders and religious elites to the Great Depression and the New Deal, and this examination of Methodist women makes an important intervention in this scholarship. The women took a starkly different stand than others of their race and class in the South who viewed government action at this scale as an incursion on their own power and authority. Though initially supportive of New Deal policies, conservative Protestant elites ultimately came to view the federal government as their competitor for who would rule poor whites and blacks in the South. Alison Collis Greene, in her study *No Depression in Heaven: the Great Depression, the New Deal, and the Transformation of Religion in the Delta*, argues that white Methodist men were important members of a coalition of Protestant elites that “turned

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<sup>3</sup> Mrs. W. J. Piggot, “The Child’s New Day” (December 1920), 7, Adult Year Book 1920-1921, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

<sup>4</sup> Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition*, 1st ed, Twentieth-Century America Series (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 219.

away from reform” represented in the New Deal.<sup>5</sup> The old ways, in which the church acted as the primary source of charity, preserved their place as head of the southern racial and class hierarchy. Such an analysis fails to consider the role of women in the denomination. Methodist women played possibly a more significant role in southern charitable work than their male counterparts, and they readily funneled their organizational strength into support of the New Deal. By the close of the 1930s, the WMC were in the vanguard in terms of making family welfare the government’s responsibility.

As I demonstrate in this chapter, the WMC’s long history of work for children explains how and why they were so ready to embrace New Deal policies in the 1930s. In the realm of child labor, the WMC was constantly frustrated by the industrialists, politicians, and parents who all turned a blind eye to child suffering, including many in their own denomination. Yet John McDowell, in his study of the WMC, mentions the New Deal only once, briefly acknowledging that the WMC supported many New Deal programs. A more thorough examination of the WMC’s engagement with government throughout the early twentieth century reveals the unique role Methodist women played in the southern reform and power structure. Though white Methodists generally came to see the New Deal as a threat, the WMC saw it as the solution to their long-held commitment to children. With much to lose and even more to gain, the WMC chose the welfare of children over any possible detriment to their social standing. Thus, this chapter offers a more nuanced portrayal of the southern reform movement by centering the unique and overlooked role of white, middle-class Methodist women in bringing about a new social order.

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<sup>5</sup> Greene, *No Depression in Heaven*, 6–9.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, industrialization had brought massive changes to the South. Merchants, industrialists, and other businessmen increasingly dominated social and political life, as textile and tobacco mills, mines, and canneries attracted more and more workers from the countryside. New towns popped up to support the mills, while existing cities ballooned. These developments changed the very social fabric of southern life, limiting the authority of the family unit and further trapping the working poor into a system that in no way benefitted them. “Despite the regional trend toward industrialization and diversification,” argues historian of the Progressive Era Dewey W. Grantham, “the South retained the principal elements of a colonial economy: an abundance of unskilled labor and undeveloped resources, inadequate capital, production of low-wage and low-value manufactures, and outside domination of the railroad trunk lines, large timber and mining properties, and much of the industrial and banking wealth.”<sup>6</sup>

Like other progressive reformers in the early decades of the twentieth century, the WMC viewed the industrialized South as ripe for reform. From the first years of their organization in the 1910s, the WMC sought to address the havoc industrialization was playing on children and families across the South. The WMC viewed “industry” – the word they usually applied to cotton mills, canneries, mines, and other factory settings in the South – as a great stumbling block to the realization of God’s kingdom on earth. In the 1915 study materials for WMC members, the authors wrote, “Industry and religion must unite if either is to realize its ideal or function in human life. For they are interdependent, and only on the common ground of their community of human interests can they ever bring 'the new heavens and the new earth' which God has promised in man through them.” The WMC studied the evils of industry – the low wages, poor work and living conditions, and long hours – with great interest. The WMC explicitly called out

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<sup>6</sup> Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 4–5.

factory and mine owners and business interests for impeding the development of industry that could serve both employer and employee alike. They advocated for legislation that would curtail these social ills and sought to make public the evils they witnessed, believing that better conditions at work would lead to better conditions at home and in the spiritual lives of workers and their families.

Child labor reform had become a pressing concern among progressive reformers and politicians in the 1910s. The WMC first began discussing child labor in a notable way in 1912. That year, the vice president in charge of social service and local work attended the Conference of the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC). The following year, WMC president Belle Bennett incorporated the social platform of the Federal Council of Churches into her address to the 1913 annual conference, affirming the WMC's commitment to the plank, "For the abolition of child labor."<sup>7</sup> Thereafter, WMC leadership led their large membership to push child labor legislation at every level of government. "If the world is to be redeemed physically, mentally, morally, and spiritually," wrote Mrs. W. A. Albright, vice president of the WMC, in 1914, "it must be done through the child, the whole child, the child with a strong body, sound mind, pure heart, and a 'right spirit within him.'"<sup>8</sup>

The practical work of deaconesses was crucial to the WMC leadership's work. As the fight over child labor legislation raged throughout the 1910s, Methodist deaconesses and home missionaries waged a complementary battle in mill villages, mining towns, and cannery neighborhoods. The WMC took seriously the task of entering communities around lead mines, cotton mills, and the like. "The delicacy of residence in the community and the efficiency of the

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<sup>7</sup> "Third Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council" (Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1913), 294, 304.

<sup>8</sup> "Fourth Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council," 81.

work,” wrote one WMC leader in 1918, “demanded that women should be prepared by a knowledge of social conditions, by training in methods of work, and by personal knowledge in the use of the Bible, in friendly visiting, and in the conduct of meetings.”<sup>9</sup> Deaconesses were required to have a high school diploma, the equivalent of two years college-level work and an additional two years of specialized training at a laity training school, such as the Scarritt Bible and Training School in Nashville, Tennessee, for their work. Before a deaconess could be commissioned to work independently, she had to complete two years of supervised probationary service. For several decades, deaconesses wore a standard uniform, notable for its austerity and distinctiveness. The long black dresses, large white neck bows, and black bonnets made their profession clear to all.<sup>10</sup> After their probationary period, deaconesses, always single women or widows, were commissioned by the MECS and assigned to a community by the WMC. The years of training paid off, as deaconesses consistently reported an impressive amount of sustained contact with both adults and children in the industrial communities. Strangers to their new community, deaconesses made their presence known through home visits, often completing hundreds if not thousands of “friendly visits” in a single year. These visits helped deaconesses establish friendly relations with workers and their families, paving the way for children and adults to participate in their many clubs and programs.

Deaconesses and home workers were savvy negotiators of their communities, and the WMC supported this sensitivity to local conditions and restraints. Deaconesses largely avoided controversial actions such as strikes, instead running Wesley Houses, community centers similar to northern settlement houses that usually sat close to factories to serve the people who worked

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<sup>9</sup> Macdonell, “The Story of the Years of City Mission Work,” 7.

<sup>10</sup> Myers, ““You Got Us All a-Pullin’ Together”: Southern Methodist Deaconesses in the Rural South, 1922-1940,” 174-75.

in them, and programs that mill owners and cannery operators actively supported. Many child labor reformers faced open hostility not just from factory owners but from the workers themselves. Reformers, such as those sent out by the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), were viewed as outsiders and met a united front when they visited factories. One field agent in North Carolina reported an “unwritten code” between owners and workers, a “gentleman’s agreement” where the workers pledged that “neither I [the field agent] nor any one else should go to the mill operatives themselves to put the matter square to them.”<sup>11</sup> Methodist women on the ground in these industry communities managed to avoid such antagonism. The Wesley Houses proved particularly advantageous in this regard. Deaconesses often lived in or near the Wesley Houses. By living and working in the communities for extended periods of time, rather than coming in briefly to take pictures and talk to workers, Methodist volunteers were able to develop relationships with both owners and their employees.

Mill owners represented both a challenge and an opportunity for WMC attitudes toward labor and for the Methodist workers on the ground. One WMC author recognized the difficulty of overcoming industrial power in the South in a 1917 pamphlet. In a nod to mill owners, he or she wrote, “Hearty cooperation has been given in most of these centers by the mill owners.”<sup>12</sup> This was likely true, as the work of churches amongst mill workers often saved mill owners the trouble of disciplining unruly employees. The authors of *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* explain the relationship between mill owners and churchmen. By teaching workers to “lead orderly, hard-working lives as an outward emblem of righteousness,” churches provided employers with well-behaved employees. Mill owners made their influence

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<sup>11</sup> William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, The Fred. W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996), 180.

<sup>12</sup> “The Kingdom Coming in the Cotton Mills,” 5.

felt through financial support, providing land, funds for church buildings, and even the paycheck for the preacher. They particularly encouraged the presence of Baptist and Methodist clergymen, whose conservative focus on hard work, gratitude, and earthly trials as a temporary reality preceding heavenly reward fit well into the mill owners' need for a docile work force. Funded by the mill owners, most preachers walked the party line. Sometimes their commitment to the priorities of mill owners went even further than sermon content. During a 1929 mill strike in Marion, NC, the Methodist minister, whose Sunday school superintendent happened to be the mill superintendent as well, "was among the strikers' worst enemies." Preachers did sometimes stray from owner-approved rhetoric, but the result of such rebellion was usually unemployment.<sup>13</sup>

However, the female missionaries and deaconesses were in a different situation. They were not preachers of their own congregations. Instead, they provided a space for spiritual guidance and practical services for women and children. Nevertheless, like their male counterparts who ran mill churches, the WMC also gladly accepted the monetary support of mill owners. A deaconess in Birmingham stated that their work was only possible because of the support of Avondale Mills, reporting, "The mill owners have done far more than I had ever hoped for. They are paying fifty dollars per month toward the support of the work, are furnishing coal, electric lights, water, janitor, and are constantly doing little things inside the building for our convenience."<sup>14</sup> Mary Wood, who oversaw the Wesley House in Thurber, TX, had a similar observation of the local mill ownership, "Thurber is a coal mining camp: everything is owned and operated by the Texas Pacific Coal Mining Company. The company furnish our building

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<sup>13</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 124–25, 221.

<sup>14</sup> "Second Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council" (Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1912), 305.

(which they remodeled two years ago) with water, coal, wood, electric lights, all free of rent.

They cooperate with us in everything that is for the betterment of the camp.” The president of the company, Mr. Marston, donated a public library that was housed in their building. He also provided the name for their Wesley House: Marston Hall.<sup>15</sup>

Methodist leaders reflected a sense of ambivalence about owner involvement in welfare work. A.M. Trawick, a MECS preacher, author of WMC literature, and professor at Scarritt Bible and Training School, was critical of managers and owners who contributed to settlement houses, seeing it as a paltry alternative to raising wages. However, he was complimentary of what he called “physical improvements” to the factories and shops themselves undertaken by capital, under which he included “better system of lighting, ventilation, sanitation, rest rooms, lunch rooms, libraries, and in some instances playgrounds and assembly rooms.” He also approved of lectures on health and prevention of accidents and efforts to provide recreation and amusement.<sup>16</sup> The writer of “The Kingdom Coming in the Cotton Mills” was more hopeful about these relationships, writing, “We dare believe this cooperation has helped to develop a sense of social responsibility and a desire for welfare work among their own people.” Though limiting discussion of mill owners’ attitudes toward the women to simply stating “most” owners gladly cooperated, the writer believed the presence and work of the Methodist women could convince owners to take on more responsibility for their employees’ wellbeing. The women likely did not consider that such welfare work, when controlled by owners, could often be a double-edged sword.

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<sup>15</sup> “Second Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 392.

<sup>16</sup> A.M. Trawick, “The Spirit of Democracy in Industry” (June 1919), 7, *Adult Year Book 1918-1919*, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.



Much of the work in industrial areas centered around the Wesley Houses. The Wesley Houses provided spiritual guidance, practical services, and recreational activities for both workers and their families. The WMC literature described the work surrounding cotton mills:

Cooking classes have taught the young girls food values and sanitary preparation of the same, and some of the mothers in the mill districts have also been taught in these classes. Day nurseries have cared for the children of the women who were forced to enter the mills. Lunches served at the Wesley Houses for the women themselves at the noon hour have helped to carry health and strength to mothers who toil. Kindergartens, night schools, Boy Scouts, Camp Fire girls, young women's clubs, Bible classes, Sunday schools, and medical clinics have helped to reveal the need of clean, strong bodies, the opportunity for mind development, and a demand for the spiritual life, which gives liberty.<sup>17</sup>

Notably, most of the activities described relate directly to children. In the early twentieth century, reformers embraced new ideas concerning child development. Child and adolescent psychologists placed new emphasis on protecting the formative years of human development, viewing children as unique from adults. Child labor practices and failures to properly educate children resulted in devastating social consequences.<sup>18</sup> Methodist women combatted this by entering industry communities and setting up shop. The volunteers taught practical skills, such as cooking, and guided their charges spiritually through Sunday schools and Bible classes. But they also provided recreation, giving children the opportunity to enroll in Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, or Camp Fire girls. Other deaconesses reported planning Valentine parties, wiener roasts, an Easter egg hunt, and picnics.<sup>19</sup> Deaconesses may have been powerless to prevent children from working in the factories, but they insisted they still be given the opportunity to be children, focusing on child welfare as a whole rather than child labor as a single issue.

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<sup>17</sup> "The Kingdom Coming in the Cotton Mills," 5–6.

<sup>18</sup> Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, 163.

<sup>19</sup> "Fourteenth Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council" (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1924), 58.

However, deaconesses and home workers did try to keep very young children out of factories as much as possible through day nurseries and kindergartens. These programs benefitted “toiling mothers” by providing care, and often spiritual and basic education, for young children so their mothers could work. These programs were a mainstay of Methodist work in industrial settings. A deaconess in Chattanooga summarized the benefits to both mothers and children when she wrote in 1931, “I do not know what our people would have done without the nursery and clinic especially. One mother, a widow trying to support her family by working in a knitting mill, said: ‘I don't see how people get along without a nursery.’ When we see such marked improvement in our children in so short a time, it is gratifying.”<sup>20</sup>

Though such programs are unexceptional in the twenty-first century, formal childcare was relatively unheard of in early twentieth-century industrial society. By providing a place for young children to go while their parents worked, the Wesley Houses kept these children from becoming “helpers” in the factories. The “helper” system, in which young children were allowed to accompany their parents to the factory, was viewed as a compromise between working mothers and management. In practice, the system was often used to get around child labor laws’ age restrictions. A NCLC agent visiting a textile factory in Mississippi in January 1914 found a mother and her underage daughter shifting bobbins at the same frame. The mother defended the setup to the agent, saying the girl was not employed – she “only helped her mother.”<sup>21</sup> Even in instances where these “helpers” were not actively participating in the work, they were still exposed to the harmful conditions and kept from the traditional activities of children, such as schooling and playtime. “Helpers” could easily turn into actual employees once they were old

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<sup>20</sup> “Twenty First Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1931), 269.

<sup>21</sup> Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, 310.

enough to reasonably “pass” the minimum age restriction. Kindergartens and day nurseries, though seemingly a domestic venture intended to help working mothers and to educate children, was also a way to circumvent expectations of child labor.

Deaconesses and home missionaries provided the most direct, hands-on approach to the issue of child labor for the WMC, and the organization supported workers in several southern states. By 1917, the WMC had Wesley Houses in twelve villages and cities with cotton mills, and twenty-five deaconesses and missionaries had reached an estimated 3,525 homes. “More than thirty thousand individuals have been personally touched,” the WMC noted.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, the WMC supported workers in five mining sections in Texas, Mississippi, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Oklahoma, as well as several in cities on the coasts serving canneries.

The WMC leadership relied on the work of deaconesses to mobilize their membership in the fight for child welfare. Throughout the 1910s, the WMC published literature concerning many different aspects of industry, including child labor. WMC writers used deaconesses’ first-hand accounts in the study materials they published and disseminated to auxiliaries across the MECS, educating their membership on the realities of industry and its harmful effects on a community’s wellbeing. Publications like the 1915 pamphlet “Ten Facts about Mines and Mountains,” for example, opened members’ eyes to exploitative mining practices, a part of southern life they knew little about. “Ten Facts” outlined the low wages, dangerous working conditions, and poor education of miners and informed readers of the work the WMC was doing through mountain schools that trained teachers as well as through deaconesses and workers assigned to mine communities.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, “The Kingdom Coming in the Cotton Mills,”

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<sup>22</sup> “The Kingdom Coming in the Cotton Mills,” 5.

<sup>23</sup> “Ten Facts about Mines and Mountains” (February 1915), Adult Year Book 1915-1917, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

published in 1917, detailed both the troubling realities of the mills as well as the work the WMC had undertaken in the mill communities.<sup>24</sup> Other pamphlets focused on child labor, women workers, immigrants in factories and mines, and other specific issues of industry. The WMC knew that the individual actions undertaken by their home workers would not be enough to solve the systemic issues facing industry in the South. The WMC leadership explained to their members that it would take the concerted efforts of the members, industrialists, Congress, and even the laborers themselves to bring about lasting change.

In their study materials, the WMC asked auxiliaries to relate these national labor problems to their local communities. For their meeting in June 1919, WMC chapters were directed to study labor issues through the lens of their local community by answering a series of questions:

1. If there are mills or factories in your community, what are the physical conditions under which the workers labor?
2. What are the hours of labor?
3. What is being done in the way of welfare work?
4. What is the scale of wages and are the wages adequate to meet the present living expense?
5. What are the laws of your State governing labor? Such as child labor laws, laws which govern the length of the working day for men and for women, and the minimum wage law.
6. If you have labor unions in your community what have they accomplished in the democratization of industry?<sup>25</sup>

The leadership compelled members to consider labor issues as a systemic problem, one that could only be solved by working at every level of industry – the laborer, the owner, and the law. And they emphasized that this systemic problem was a local one: low wages and long working hours affected workers in their own or nearby communities.

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<sup>24</sup> “The Kingdom Coming in the Cotton Mills.”

<sup>25</sup> Trawick, “The Spirit of Democracy in Industry,” 16.

The WMC believed that these issues in particular – long hours and low wages – directly contributed to the breakdown of the family structure. With both parents working long hours in factories and other industrial settings, children missed out on the moral and spiritual instruction the WMC viewed as vital. Many adolescents left the home entirely, finding work in cities and living apart from their families. Methodist women were dismayed at the number of boys and girls moving to the cities without family or parent, responding to the siren call of factory wages. The morality of young people, particularly sexual morality, was of supreme importance to the WMC. All children had the potential to go “wayward,” but youths outside of the home, particularly girls, were in danger of sexual degradation. Writing about girls working in industry in 1915, Maud Turpin explained, “Few girls incline naturally to vice; and when they go wrong, the chances are that it is because those who should be so infinitely concerned for their welfare have failed to provide some simple safeguard. Industrialism is not the chief source of female delinquency; more often the slipshod, ill-governed home is responsible.”<sup>26</sup>

The WMC’s concern over what they perceived as an absence of parental care and guidance within the working-class home pushed them in an increasingly radical direction as they began to explore solutions that supplanted parental authority altogether with that of the church or the government. The WMC became increasingly comfortable calling for institutions to intervene in the traditional roles of parents. It also led the WMC to consider eugenics as a means of imposing control over the family structure. In the years leading up to World War I, the WMC took part in the work of “negative” eugenicists, who believed in the segregation and later the sterilization of women deemed “unfit” to procreate. These advocates believed that sterilization was “an efficient way to prevent the spread of mental and moral deficiency to future

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<sup>26</sup> Maud M. Turpin, “The Adolescent Girl in Industry” (June 1915), 4, *Adult Year Book 1915-1917*, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

generations,” a concern compatible with those of the WMC.<sup>27</sup> In their bid to save children from inheriting the faults of their parents, the WMC advocated for legislation that would prevent the marriage of the “unfit” or those with hereditary deficiencies. Mabel Howell, the Superintendent of Social Service in the late 1910s, called this “the right to be well born.” In her view, a child had the right not to be “cursed from its birth.” This included the right not to have unmarried parents, to be born a “degenerate or a moral pervert,” or to be born with a mental or physical handicap. Howell argued that the state should intervene to preserve this right. State and federal prohibition laws could make it impossible for a child to be born of alcoholic parents. The state, she believed, should build institutions for the “feeble-minded,” enact compulsory commitment of the “feeble-minded,” and prevent their marriage so that “feeble-minded” children would not be born. WMC leaders also called for marital age limits and consent laws, arguing that “wherever the average age for marriage is increased, the physical welfare of the offspring has been improved.”<sup>28</sup>

Like much of the nation in the years of the First World War, the WMC was very concerned about the “great social evil”: venereal disease. Medical exams of young men drafted into the war had uncovered scores of cases of sexually transmitted disease. Methodist women were concerned about the young women who might fall victim to disease and the potential babies born to infected parents. In multiple publications in the late 1910s, Methodist women argued for laws that would require health certificates or health examinations before a man and a woman could marry. Arguments for other legislation regarding public sanitation and factory

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<sup>27</sup> Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>28</sup> M. K. Howell, “Social Legislation Regarding Childhood” (June 1917), 2, *Adult Year Book 1915-1917*, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries; I. M. Cartwright, “Institutions for the Care of the Sick and for the Prevention of Disease” (March 1916), 3, *Adult Year Book 1915-1917*, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

safety were moot, contended Frances Dudley, if “social diseases” ran rampant. The only solution to this issue was legal regulation of marriage.<sup>29</sup>

Advocacy of laws that would regulate marriage was one of the most direct interventions by the WMC into people’s personal lives. These laws were largely intended to target working class southerners, and the WMC had no misgivings about interfering in their lives. “So far the practice of eugenics has been largely experimental,” explained a leaflet in 1916, “but the proper shaping of marriage laws has extremely important results in determining the welfare of the race, and it is hoped the coming generations will reap the benefit of the present-day efforts.”

In addition to regulating who could have children, the WMC also supported strategies to intervene in families where parents had already failed. The WMC advocated for institutions that could care for children and adolescents in lieu of parents. They were adamant that children should be treated as juvenile delinquents rather than adult criminals, and their courts, sentences, and jails should be different than that of adults.<sup>30</sup> The WMC believed delinquents could be reformed and should not be banished to adult penitentiaries where their redemption would be impossible. They advocated the establishment of “receiving home[s] for these little criminals or helpless children until they might be permanently located in some institution or returned to their parents in their rehabilitated homes.” This view reveals the WMC belief that parents were to blame for children’s misdeeds. Only once the child had been reformed *and* the home provided by the parents had been rehabilitated would children return to their families. The WMC sponsored some of these institutions for “delinquents.” The Virginia K. Johnson Home and Training School, named after the Methodist home worker who founded the institution in 1911, served

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<sup>29</sup> Dudley, “Needed Legislation Regarding Public Health,” 6; Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, 228; “Sixth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 183.

<sup>30</sup> Turpin, “The Adolescent Girl in Industry,” 4–6.

girls ages 12 to 25 “to whom all doors are closed, frequently the doors of their own homes...saving them from utter despair and a greater sin and deeper degradation.” Johnson Home residents were often unwed mothers and prostitutes from across the South. Located in Dallas, the Johnson Home provided accommodations for up to 200 young women. The school offered a general education curriculum, as well as religious instruction, basic homemaking, vocational training, including courses in typing, bookkeeping, and stenography. In 1918-1919, the home housed 102 girls with an average age of 16. In that year, 35 babies were born to residents.<sup>31</sup>

A different category of institution run by the Methodists, homes for “dependent girls,” gave the WMC further opportunity to intervene in the family. These facilities acted as a sort of institutional parent, providing practical, moral, and spiritual guidance for girls who hadn’t yet succumbed to degradation but were in danger of falling into iniquity. These “pure but ignorant” girls had no place to go that would not corrupt them. A prime example of this work is the Vashti Industrial School, founded in 1903 in Thomasville, Georgia, which served “dependent girls” between the ages of 10 and 18. Some of Vashti’s residents were orphans who had aged out of the orphanage, while others came from poorhouses or were taken out of “dangerous environments.” According to the principal, of the 124 girls housed in 1918, “fifty were practically homeless; forty from broken homes, twenty from immoral or unsafe environments, and fourteen reported by their stepmothers to be incorrigible.” A deaconess in Chattanooga described placing a girl in Vashti. The local WMC society paid all the expenses, “except a small amount monthly from her father.” The girl’s brother was placed in an industrial school, “where he will have an opportunity

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<sup>31</sup> Howell, “Social Legislation Regarding Childhood,” 5; Macdonell, “The Story of the Years of City Mission Work,” 15; Elizabeth York Enstam, “JOHNSON, VIRGINIA KNIGHT,” Handbook of Texas Online, June 15, 2010, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fjoal>; “Ninth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1919), 86, 324.



to develop into a useful citizen.” Clearly these children were not orphans, yet the deaconess, for an undisclosed reason, thought they would be better off living away from their father.<sup>32</sup>

Vashti typically housed between 75 and 125 girls, but there was constantly more demand for spots in Vashti than the school was able to provide. Vashti sought to train the girls to be faithful contributors to society. The school provided practical industrial training as well as education through the eighth grade before sending the students on to local high schools. The WMC spoke with pride of the “girls who have gone out from Vashti” as respectable women, working as nurses or in schools and factories and often creating homes and families of their own.<sup>33</sup>

Leaders of Vashti were very clear that the school was specifically for “dependent” girls, not those in need of medical care or moral reform. The principal of Vashti expressed frustration with the WMC, which, despite owning Vashti for twelve years at that point, still did not seem to understand what the school was meant to do. Principal E. E. Bishop wrote in 1919:

To meet the different needs and notions of all would require an institution on the compartment plan. For example, if the president of an auxiliary in Texas has an incorrigible girl, she thinks Vashti is a reformatory. If a corresponding secretary in Virginia knows of a delicate child, she esteems Vashti a health resort. If a deaconess in Tennessee finds a fallen girl, to her Vashti is a rescue home; while one good lady wrote us about a feeble-minded girl for whom we would have to send, as she was mentally incapable of traveling alone and friends were too poor to provide a chaperone. She supposed, too, that the institution paid railroad fare.

Vashti was intended to help girls who had no other recourse and needed only “protection and training.” In Bishop’s view, there were more institutions for immoral children than moral ones. If

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<sup>32</sup> “Ninth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 303, 321.

<sup>33</sup> *History of Woman’s Missionary Work, 1879-1955* (Macon, GA: Lyon Marshall & Brooks, 1956), 31–32; Sara Estelle Haskin, *Women and Missions in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1925), 193.

Vashti was to accept an “immoral” girl, the school would no longer be an appropriate place for “pure” girls.<sup>34</sup>

While schools like Vashti sought to keep girls from entering the dangerous world of cities and factories, scores of other girls did move to the city seeking work. In response, the WMC organized cooperative homes in urban areas, especially during the First World War. In 1919, the WMC ran cooperative homes in seven different cities. These boarding houses, usually run by deaconesses or home workers, provided care and protection for “young, inexperienced girls” who arrived “sometimes without money and without friends in the city.” The houses could provide moral uplift to working girls who came “from homes without strong moral influence” and keep them out of “cheap and unsafe boarding houses.” Like Vashti, the cooperative homes made a point of only accepting girls with appropriate morals. A deaconess running the house in Richmond, Virginia, reported, “We require in the application blank the names of two people who can recommend the girl, but we can't wait to write and get a return letter always. If we do, the girl gets located elsewhere; so I must judge of character largely by face and manner, and sometimes I am deceived.”<sup>35</sup>

The existence of places like the Johnson Home reformatory, the Vashti School for dependent girls, and boarding houses demonstrate how Methodist women intruded directly into working-class families’ lives. Deaconesses, often with the financial support of WMC auxiliaries, convinced parents or other caretakers to release their children into the WMC’s care. Yet reformatories were not a cure, but rather a bandage, argued WMC writer Dr. Carrie Weaver Smith in 1916, as their existence “rests upon the ruin of the home and often a ruin that might

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<sup>34</sup> “Ninth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 320.

<sup>35</sup> “Protecting Young Womanhood: The Working Girl” (November 1919), 5, *Adult Year Book 1918-1919*, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries; “Ninth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 296, 299.

have been avoided.” Giving license to WMC readers to interest themselves in the homes that were at risk of ruin, Smith wrote, “Let us not point with satisfaction to our custodial institutions until we have satisfied our own consciences that we have done everything in our power as individuals, as citizens, as Christians, to make such institutions unnecessary.” Such a vision, in which the family was whole once again, required the direct intervention of the WMC into working-class families’ lives.<sup>36</sup>

As the WMC worked on a variety of fronts to mitigate the ills that industrialism had wrought on the welfare of working-class children and youth, the issue of child labor continued to draw their attention and direct efforts throughout the 1910s. The problem of child labor in the South was indicative of the ways southern society had not caught up to the changes industry had brought to their lives. Many factory workers, particularly in the textile belt, came from rural areas with a strong farming economy. Family labor, especially children’s labor, contributed the bulk of the labor on a farm. Historians have shown that mill workers transferred these traditions of the farm to the industrial setting. What worked on the farm – and was largely socially acceptable there – was applied to the cotton mill or cannery. Child labor permeated the southern economy, both on the farm and in the factory.<sup>37</sup>

The crisis of child labor encapsulated how industrialism harmed every aspect of child welfare. Low wages required parents to send their children to work, and long working hours prevented parents from adequately supervising and instructing even those children still at home. Working kept children out of schools and placed them in dangerous, dirty industrial environments. Child labor was a threat to children’s health, education, morals, and their right to

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<sup>36</sup> Carrie Weaver Smith, “A Study of Delinquents and Their Institutional Care” (December 1916), 1–2, *Adult Year Book 1915-1917*, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

<sup>37</sup> Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, 179, 308.

simply be children. Their experiences working with parents and industry leaders had convinced the women of the WMC that neither could be relied upon to do the right thing by children. Some of its leaders agreed with NCLC reformers that parents were to blame; one study booklet complained in 1915, "Too often the head of the household regards his growing family as an investment and the young boys and girls as bonds which mature as soon as they enter their teens, when they are thrust forth into the industrial market place and expected to return dividends." The Methodists were frustrated with the failure of parents and other entities to act. Passing child labor laws was futile, they argued, if the people who were supposed to be protecting children refused to abide by them. As another study booklet put it in 1919, "We evade almost every law we pass for the protection of children. Just so long as there is money to be made out of the labor of children, and just as long as the public permits it, parents and guardians, foremen, managers, and mill owners will continue to lie and perjure their souls over the employment of little children."<sup>38</sup> John Andrews, the secretary of the American Association for Labor Legislation, told WMC women in 1917, "A Senator in Washington once remarked that the women's clubs of this country can secure the passage of almost any bill through Congress if they will but work together in its support for two or three years."<sup>39</sup> WMC members made their best effort, throwing their weight behind state and federal child labor legislation. They did this by educating members about child labor, encouraging their members to study local conditions and contact their representatives, and speaking for their large membership in missives to Congress.

In the early 1910s, the WMC supported the efforts of the NCLC to pass state-level laws regulating child labor. Conferences worked with the State Federated Clubs to pass uniform child

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<sup>38</sup> Trawick, "The Spirit of Democracy in Industry," 13.

<sup>39</sup> John B. Andrews, "Protection for Wage Earners Through Labor Legislation" (September 1917), 6, Adult Year Book 1915-1917, Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

labor laws, and the Social Service department directed conference standing committees of social service “to keep in touch with proposed legislation within the State in order to inaugurate and encourage wise legislation for welfare and community betterment.”<sup>40</sup> By 1912, every southern state had some form of age and hour limit, though the laws were inadequate and almost entirely unenforced. The leading textile states had a work week limit of sixty hours and an age limit of twelve years old.<sup>41</sup> The laws were also full of loopholes, with special allowances for children who worked out of “necessity” or for the children of widows. Factory owners and managers made no attempts to ensure children and parents were truthful about their ages, and the states expressed little interest in double checking.<sup>42</sup>

Disappointed with their limited success of state-by-state legislation, the NCLC began to reconsider its stance on federal labor legislation. The NCLC had originally vowed not to take up federal legislation on child labor, instead embracing a “states’ rights” view of the issue in which states alone had the power to legislate child labor. But in 1907, the Committee reversed their stance when they endorsed the Beveridge Bill, a child labor reform bill introduced in the Senate, and chaos ensued. The founding father of the NCLC, Edgar Gardner Murphy, resigned from the board in protest of the organization’s support of federal legislation and worked diligently to kill the bill. As disagreement within the NCLC over the issue continued and the prospect of passage in the Senate grew bleaker, the NCLC withdrew their support later that year.<sup>43</sup>

Much changed after the ill-fated Beveridge Bill in 1907 that emboldened the NCLC to pursue federal legislation. Murphy died unexpectedly in 1913, leaving his colleagues in the

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<sup>40</sup> “Fourth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 61, 191.

<sup>41</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 40.

<sup>42</sup> Marjorie Elizabeth Wood, “Emancipating the Child Laborer: Children, Freedom, and the Moral Boundaries of the Market in the United States, 1853-1938” (Chicago, Illinois, University of Chicago, 2011), 207–8.

<sup>43</sup> Wood, 191, 196.

NCLC feeling less beholden to his “states’ rights” legacy. The federal government gave the issue of child labor unprecedented attention. After the defeat of the Beveridge Bill, Congress ordered an investigation into the condition of women and child labor in the country, and the resulting publicity confirmed the realities of child labor that the NCLC had proclaimed for years. The Committee was also encouraged by the creation of the Federal Children’s Bureau within the Department of Commerce and Labor in 1912, a move the WMC also applauded. Legislation at the national level could circumvent the industry leaders in the South who actively supported child labor, provide greater methods of enforcement, and prevent the transport of child-made goods across state lines. This last issue was vital to the bill the NCLC itself drafted in 1913, using the commerce clause to prohibit from interstate commerce “goods in the production of which children under 14 have been employed in factories, mills, canneries, and workshops, or children under 16 in mines and quarries, and goods in the production of which children between 14 and 16 have been employed for more than 8 hours a day or at night.” The Palmer-Owen Bill was introduced with the support of two progressive Democrats, Representative Mitchell Palmer from Pennsylvania and Senator Robert Owen from Oklahoma.<sup>44</sup>

The road to passage was long and arduous. The House passed the Palmer-Owen Bill in February 1915, but it took another year and a half for the Senate and the House to agree on a bill. Renamed the Keating-Owen Act when Representative Keating of Colorado sponsored the bill in 1916, discussion in Congress grew heated. According to historian Elizabeth Wood, supporters of the bill in the House focused on “the immorality of a capitalism that exploited children,” while opponents continued to frame child labor as a local issue, beyond the reach of the federal government. By this point, the NCLC had successfully made child labor a religious and moral

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<sup>44</sup> Wood, 206–13; Dudley, “Needed Legislation Regarding Public Health,” 5.

issue, and opponents of the bill struggled to frame their opposition in moral terms. They attempted to point to widows who needed their children to work to survive or to scripture that cast labor, even child labor, as an essential aspect of life determined by the original curse of man. The Senate debated, as Wood writes, “to what extent the commerce clause gave Congress the power to regulate capitalism on the basis of morality.” As in the House, Senators opposed to the bill struggled to give their stance a moral argument “that could counter the Social Gospel-inspired fervor of the bill’s supporters.” Even as they debated the constitutionality of the bill, all Senators seemed to concede child labor itself was “evil.” The issue, then, was at what point in the industrial/transportation/marketing process did the “evil” take place.<sup>45</sup>

The WMC fearlessly waded into the debate over the regulation of capitalism based on morality. The women believed strongly that the moral and physical salvation of the country, particularly of children, required both the church and the government. “It is the function of the Church,” wrote WMC author Frances Dudley, “to unite legislative, social, and religious forces, so to order the world’s work that the bodies of God’s children become the fit dwelling places of the Holy Spirit.” A 1915 publication on the church and labor posited that industrial workers had rejected the church because they believed “the Church caters to the rich; that the Christianity of the Church has been indifferent to the care of human life; that Christianity teaches a standard of living but that the Church does not exact from society such employment and wages as make it possible for the laboring man to maintain such a standard.” But in the previous ten years, the church had “awakened” to the labor problem and advocated for labor regulation laws and child labor organizations. “Missionary women” of the WMC could specifically “give publicity to every social and industrial evil and use moral suasion for the enactment of laws which protect or

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<sup>45</sup> Wood, “Emancipating the Child Laborer: Children, Freedom, and the Moral Boundaries of the Market in the United States, 1853-1938,” 229–34.

relieve.” The WMC dedicated the entirety of their 1917 literature to “the Kingdom of God,” including several publications on “the Kingdom of God in Legislation.” The WMC materials expressed support for safety regulations, minimum wage laws, working hour restrictions, compulsory health insurance laws, and sanitary regulations, among many others.<sup>46</sup>

The WMC’s commitment to child labor reform brought them up against powerful industrial interests in the South. The women faced opposition to strict child labor legislation in their own families and social circles, making grassroots organizing difficult in local auxiliaries. As soon as federal child labor legislation was suggested, the editor of the *Southern Textile Bulletin*, David Clark, organized mill owner opposition. Many of the Senators opposed to the bill were from the South, especially textile states. However, this did not mean that there were no local efforts by WMC members. In 1916, the Bureau of Social Service reported that “a small group petitioned their Representatives at Washington to support the Federal Child Labor Amendment,” and in 1919 auxiliaries reported that fifteen child labor laws had been enacted.<sup>47</sup>

Despite these difficulties with advocacy on the ground, the WMC pressed forward with presenting a united organization front on the issue. In 1916, the WMC gave their full-throated endorsement of the Keating-Owen Act. At their annual conference session, the organization passed a motion to instruct the Superintendent of Social Service to send messages to four southern senators:

Whereas we believe that a nation’s welfare is bound up in the proper development of its future citizens; and whereas the curse of child labor continues to destroy the physical, mental, and moral health of young children – therefore be it  
*Resolved*, That the following resolution be adopted, signed, and sent to Senators Robert Owen, Hoke Smith, Thomas W. Hardwick, and Albert Cummings:

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<sup>46</sup> Dudley, “Needed Legislation Regarding Public Health,” 8; “A Church and Labor Catechism,” 2–4; “Yearbook Adult Auxiliaries.”

<sup>47</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 42; Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 370; Hall et al., *Like a Family*, 59; “Sixth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 132; “Ninth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 86.



“The Woman’s Missionary Council of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, consisting of 107,000 representative women from every Southern State, heartily indorses the content of the Keating-Owen Child Labor Bill, now pending in the Senate, and we respectfully urge our Southern Senators to give it their unqualified support.”<sup>48</sup>

In sending this missive, the WMC laid claim to the power of their numbers. One hundred and seven thousand white churchwomen of a respected southern denomination were no small endorsement for an issue that they could claim as under their particular maternal purview. It did not matter whether each member actually supported child labor legislation. Enough leadership and representatives at the annual conference did so to pass such a resolution, and the WMC officially endorsed a federal child labor regulation bill.

After more than a decade of single-issue advocacy, the NCLC and its allies finally won a major legislative victory for the child labor reform movement. The Senate passed the bill on August 8, 1916, and President Woodrow Wilson – despite his earlier opposition on the grounds of constitutionality and federal government overreach – signed the bill into law on September 1, 1916. The WMC was jubilant. The Secretary of Home Work, Tochie MacDonell, wrote that the passage of this bill gave children “a chance for physical and mental standards impossible in the past.” She continued, “We shall have no cotton mill starvelings nor illiterates in the next generation.” A home missionary in Darlington, South Carolina reported that the bill was already having a great effect in her field, writing, “One of the greatest blessings that have come to the community is the enforcement of the child labor law. I believe I can safely say there is not a child under fourteen working in our mill nor one under sixteen working more than eight hours.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> “Sixth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 44, 182.

<sup>49</sup> Wood, “Emancipating the Child Laborer: Children, Freedom, and the Moral Boundaries of the Market in the United States, 1853-1938,” 234; “Seventh Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1917), 94; “Eighth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 318.

On the eve of US entry into World War I, the WMC had cause to be pleased with their efforts thus far. They had successfully helped pass a major federal child labor law, and their deaconesses and home workers were working to improve the lives of industry workers across the South. But the war brought new challenges to this campaign. When the United States entered the First World War, all labor legislation, including the Keating-Owen Act, came under fire in the name of “wartime necessity.” States quickly passed laws suspending various labor laws for the purposes of the war effort. Reformers were now on the defensive, and they quickly pivoted their rationale to one of national interest, arguing that child labor weakened the American nation and its ability to defend democracy abroad.<sup>50</sup> In addition to the critiques raised by the United States’ entry into the war, the child labor law was under attack from the courts as well. Southern textile men maintained their opposition to the bill, despite President Wilson’s endorsement. David Clark, the textile journalist who had successfully drummed up mill-owner opposition to federal legislation, recruited a textile mill worker, Roland Dagenhart, who worked in a Charlotte mill along with his two teenage sons, to sue for his right to keep his sons employed at the mill. The suit made two key arguments against the bill: by denying him his children’s earnings, the Keating-Owen Act violated Dagenhart’s constitutional right to “due process” under the Fifth Amendment, and Congress did not have the constitutional power to regulate local labor conditions. The Supreme Court agreed, upholding a lower court ruling that the act was unconstitutional on June 3, 1918.<sup>51</sup>

The overturning of the Keating-Owen Act was a major blow to the NCLC and child labor reformers, but it also illustrates how, according to historian Elizabeth Wood, “the Social Gospel

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<sup>50</sup> Wood, “Emancipating the Child Laborer: Children, Freedom, and the Moral Boundaries of the Market in the United States, 1853-1938,” 234–39.

<sup>51</sup> Wood, 241–42.

crusade against child labor that had made the Keating-Owen Act a reality was fading from public discourse and political relevance.” Forced by the war to change their rhetorical tactics, the NCLC framed opposition to child labor in terms of national interest rather than the evils of capitalism. The welfare of children did not cease to be a national issue during the war, but “the meaning of child welfare was shifting to accommodate the war effort.” During and after the war, the term “child welfare” broadly covered any effort to provide for the physical and mental care of American children. Wood argues, “Under the wartime definition of child welfare, the campaign against child labor became just another component of a broader national effort to conserve and protect the nation’s children.” This shift in definition helped prevent the rollback of child labor laws and the softening of education requirements, but it also shifted the national debate away from the “moral boundaries of the market.”<sup>52</sup>

Following a similar court defeat of the child labor reform movement’s second attempt with the “Tax on Employment of Child Labor” in 1922, reformers began considering a constitutional amendment that would give Congress the power to regulate child labor. Emboldened by the fact that Congress had now passed two laws regulating child labor, reformers viewed the path to a constitutional amendment to be relatively smooth. They had more allies now than before, with dozens of women’s clubs, religious organizations, labor unions, and other entities joining their cause. The WMC continued their steadfast support of this movement. They endorsed the constitutional amendment at their annual conference in 1923, reporting out of the Committee on Social Service: “We indorse the proposed Federal amendment on child labor which provides that, “The Congress shall have power concurrent with that of the several States to limit or prohibit the labor of persons under the age of eighteen years.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Wood, 242–44.

<sup>53</sup> 270; “Thirteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 167–68.

But the opposition had also acquired new allies who had not previously spoken out against child labor reform. While reformers had before faced down textile owners, industrialists, and “states’ rights” sympathizers, the opposition coalition they encountered in the 1920s now included millions of rural farm families, fundamentalist Christians, urban Catholics, anti-suffragist women, and conservative intellectuals. This new bloc coalesced around suspicion of government intervention in families’ lives. Child labor reform challenged the traditional rural family structure as an economic and productive unit. The debate in the 1920s pitted reformers, who viewed unfettered capitalism as the primary threat to children against those who argued that the federal government was the true threat. In the end, the latter argument proved insurmountable, especially following the changed views of child welfare precipitated by the First World War. “Promoting fear of government takeover of the home, usurpation of parental authority, destruction of the sacred Constitution, and a Communist-inspired plot to gain control of Washington,” writes Elizabeth Wood, “these groups worked together to overwhelm the reformers and, remarkably, were able to block ratification of the amendment before the end of the decade.”<sup>54</sup>

WMC leaders did their best to put the weight of their membership behind the amendment. They endorsed the amendment once again in 1924. Besides endorsing the amendment as an organization, leaders also encouraged members to contact their Congressional members directly. In 1924, Bertha Newell, the superintendent of the Bureau of Social Service, wrote, “Measures of vital interest to women were before legislatures. Some of them were rallied to their support by their Conference officers.” Newell shared how many members had written letters in support of the child labor amendment to senators and representatives in Washington.

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<sup>54</sup> Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, 304, 309; Wood, “Emancipating the Child Laborer: Children, Freedom, and the Moral Boundaries of the Market in the United States, 1853-1938,” 273.

She was disappointed, however, that her membership had not done more, writing, “Probably only a faint whisper has gone up, however, when if every woman who could have spoken had spoken there would have been a mighty shout echoing in the halls of congress.” The membership had failed to rise to the occasion, despite years of publicity on child labor legislation. “I long for the day,” Newell wrote, “when the complacency of good and prosperous women with things as they are shall be disturbed.”<sup>55</sup> She seemed resigned to the amendment’s defeat in her report of 1925: “Work for the ratification of the Child Labor Amendment was widespread and intense, so was the opposition from manufacturing interests.” Nevertheless, she wrote, “We shall carry on.”<sup>56</sup>

After the failure of the federal child labor laws, Newell wrote a series of pamphlets for the auxiliaries’ study, acknowledging the difficulty of working against “intrenched forces of self-interest and selfishness.” The striking down of the federal laws was representative of the “inadequacies of the law that has framed itself into constitutions that expressed the mind of a former age.” But Newell was undaunted by new criticisms regarding legislating child labor and she continued pushing for state-level legislation. “The responsibility rests upon us as Southern women of seeing that adequate State laws are passed,” wrote Newell. In a study booklet published for the December 1926 auxiliary meetings, Newell reprinted the NCLC’s minimum standards for child labor, and challenged her readers to question whether their states were meeting them. Newell described in detail state-level successes and failures to date, pointing out the rejection of the North Carolina legislature of a bill limiting the working day for children under sixteen to eight hours. Newell argued that church women had a responsibility to rally

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<sup>55</sup> “Fourteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 132.

<sup>56</sup> “Fifteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1925), 127.

behind this cause. “What would have been the fate of this [North Carolina] bill had the Church organizations of women in the State stood solidly behind it?” she asked, “It is unbelievable that women, by tradition and by instinct the conservers of childhood, cannot be touched by an appeal for the rights of children.”<sup>57</sup>

Newell took aim at the traditional arguments against child labor regulation. She outlined the “states’ rights” argument presented by opponents to the constitutional amendment and argued that since it represented a distinctly southern point of view, it was now the South’s responsibility to “take the lead” in creating an organized effort to pass state laws. In response to the moral argument that pleaded the cause of poor widows, Newell advocated for Mothers’ Aid Laws that would provide government support to “worthy mothers, widows, or who for some reason are deprived of a bread-winning husband.” Child labor may seem cheaper, Newell reasoned, but the costs to children’s health, education, and resourcefulness had long-term effects on a state’s economic efficiency. In blunt terms Newell wrote, “Child labor does not lessen poverty, but perpetuates it.” She ended with a question posed to her readers, “If Christ’s great plea was for the sacredness of personality, what attitude should his followers take toward an economic system that permits the cramping of the personality of children?” Bertha Newell, at least, had not abandoned the NCLC’s original arguments regarding the immoral effects of capitalism on children.<sup>58</sup>

As the legal and political losses for child labor reform mounted throughout the 1920s, the WMC questioned whether this was the most effective route to benefitting child welfare. By 1926, Bertha Newell had concluded that the “overwhelming odds” stacked against them made it

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<sup>57</sup> “Thirteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 129; Newell, “Faith and the State,” 2; Mrs. W. A. Newell, “The Child: Social Service” (December 1926), 3–5, *Adult Year Book 1926-1927*, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

<sup>58</sup> Newell, “The Child: Social Service,” 2, 6–8.

“evident there can be no Federal regulation of child labor for several years to come.”<sup>59</sup> As the WMC countered attacks on the child labor legislation in the 1920s, WMC leaders, deaconesses, and home workers began to more pointedly question whether parents were complicit in the child labor system. Deaconesses and home workers cared deeply for the adults and children they served, and they lamented the circumstances that forced families into great poverty and need. But that did not prevent them from noting working parents’ failings and attempting to correct them. Methodist women increasingly mistrusted working-class parents’ ability to properly care for and train their children. In a 1920 study booklet for local auxiliaries, Mrs. W. J. Piggott, an active social service worker, wrote:

The truth is that we are still living under the shadow of the old belief that the mother instinct is sufficient protection for the child, notwithstanding the fact that thousands of babies die annually from the wrong kind of care, as well as from the lack of care, and yet other thousands are given yearly to the industrial machine and interests which leave them mangled in body, mind, and soul. The mother nature which would have saved either did not know how or else was powerless in the face of hard conditions and poverty on the one hand and greed and indifference on the other.<sup>60</sup>

As southern society changed in the face of industrialization, working class parents were unequipped – and, at times, unwilling – to provide their children with physical or spiritual care and education and to keep them out of factories or off the streets. In 1922, missionaries in coal fields lamented families who “pushed aside” their children to make room for boarders in their “matchbox houses.” Children did not work in the coal mines, but they were left to fend for themselves during the day: “At the railroad stations, in the pool rooms, or wherever any excitement is to be found there are always found groups of unkempt, dirty children.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Newell, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Piggott, “The Child’s New Day,” 4.

<sup>61</sup> “Who, Why, and What in the Coal Fields of Oklahoma and West Virginia” (August 1922), 5, Adult Year Book 1922-1923, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

Working-class parents were, in fact, some of the strongest proponents of child labor. In states with age restriction laws, parents often lied about their children's ages, and neither the management nor the government cared to ask for proof. One NCLC investigator at a mill in Birmingham found that "most of the child workers seemed almost conditioned to respond that their age was twelve – the legal limit." NCLC reformers blamed these labor violations on the greed and ignorance of parents. In his analysis of Progressive Era child labor reformers, William Link found that reformers "generally held the parents in low esteem and blamed them for allowing their children to work." Reformers also had difficulty with the children themselves, who often expressed a preference for the mill over school. "Mill work was a source of pride as well as pain, of fun as much as suffering," argue one group of historians, "and children made choices, however hedged about by their parents' authority and their bosses' power." "One of the greatest and most difficult problems of the Christian worker," a WMC writer lamented in 1922, "is to teach the neglected children to see that the influence of the school is for good." They blamed parents for this as well, decrying their inability to adequately discipline and control their children and their refusal to prioritize education.<sup>62</sup>

In the 1920s, the WMC made a concerted effort to train parents in the sacred duty of raising their children. The WMC's experience working with industrial laborers influenced their shift to the arguments espoused by "positive" eugenicists. Influenced by new social science research, these activists began to shift the link between parents and children from heredity to environment. According to scholar Wendy Kline, "By emphasizing environment rather than heredity, the eugenics movement survived the attack by geneticists and social scientists and flourished in a society in search of immediate and effective solutions to severe economic and

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<sup>62</sup> Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, 172, 178, 305–7; Hall et al., *Like a Family*, 60; "Who, Why, and What in the Coal Fields of Oklahoma and West Virginia," 6.



social problems as well as for ways to stabilize the family.”<sup>63</sup> Working class parents struggled to properly raise their children not because they were genetically unfit, but because they had never been taught how to nurture their young. The WMC never abandoned the fight for child labor laws, but they increasingly called for legislation to regulate the family and control the home environment, interfering in parents’ choices regarding their children and expanding programs that would step in where the family structure had failed. In their view, the child should be “the concern of all.” Parents, governesses, and teachers may have been sufficient for the care of the young in the past, argued one WMC publication in 1927, “but this is not the case today.”<sup>64</sup>

Acting on their belief that mothers in many communities may have “never learned the best ways of caring for their babies and young children,” the WMC advocated education and state-sponsored financial support. Leaders encouraged auxiliaries to “organize a friendship community club, where they would study the needs of children for exercise, play, fresh air, sleep, and the proper foods for growth and health.” The auxiliaries could utilize free literature the WMC provided to learn “how to make a beginning with mothers of any class or race.” This concern also motivated the WMC to sponsor Mothers’ Aid or Mothers’ Pension laws in southern states, and they asked auxiliaries to ascertain “the amount appropriated to their home county, whether it is sufficient to the need, how administered, and how to secure increased appropriations when needed.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 100.

<sup>64</sup> Althea Jones, “The Child and the New Earth” (May 1927), 5, *Adult Year Book 1926-1927*, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

<sup>65</sup> Piggot, “The Child’s New Day,” 5; Bertha Newell, “Our Community: What We Have Done and What We Need to Do” (December 1923), 2, *Adult Year Book 1922-1923*, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries; “Nineteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1929), 126.

The deaconesses and home missionaries took parenting instruction to the camps and mines. They attempted to teach parents methods that – in their view – would allow them to better care for their children. Christian workers needed “to show the parents how necessary it is to make home sweet, wholesome, and attractive to the children” rather than, in the case of the coal fields, “driving them out to make room for the boarders.” Mothers’ clubs were a popular program for the deaconesses and home workers, providing training for “the women who through ignorance and superstition are not prepared to fulfill the full ministry of motherhood.” Clubs and industrial classes drew adults and their children to the Wesley Houses and gave the deaconesses the opportunity to teach sewing, cooking, and housekeeping. Work with children also opened the way for the missionaries to reach the adults. They viewed Sunday schools for children as a means to reach the parents for spiritual instruction. A deaconess working in West Virginia coal fields reported, “Realizing more and more that my first duty is to work with the children, emphasis has been placed upon Sunday school, Scout work, and sewing clubs. However, by house-to-house visiting I endeavor to carry the gospel to the fathers and mothers and desire earnestly that my daily life among them may be ‘a light set on a hill.’”<sup>66</sup>

The 1930s represented a turning point in Methodist women’s advocacy for family welfare. The Great Depression laid bare how unstable the family had become, and it accentuated the plight of child and women laborers. In 1932, the WMC Committee on Research and Study of the Status of Women reported, “It is well known that industrial conditions are worse for women than they are for men; women work longer hours, for lower wages, under less desirable conditions.”<sup>67</sup> On the one hand, child labor declined during the 1930s as they fell victim to

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<sup>66</sup> “Who, Why, and What in the Coal Fields of Oklahoma and West Virginia,” 6; Macdonell, “The Story of the Years of City Mission Work,” 9; “Second Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 406; “Fourteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 222, 226.

<sup>67</sup> “Twenty Second Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 158.

unemployment as did adults. But desperate employers also replaced adults with children, who they could pay less and work longer hours. Sweatshop conditions had made their comeback by 1933, and industrialists crossed state lines to take advantage of lower labor standards.<sup>68</sup>

By the time the Depression had fully captured the nation, the WMC had concluded that the quickest and most effective change, for any issue, would have to come from the intervention of the federal government. The Great Depression proved unequivocally the realities of the poor and working class that the WMC had known for years. Bertha Newell wrote to WMC members, “In order to relieve the troubles of the share-cropper, the unemployed mechanic, the slum dweller and even the banker and manufacturer, the national government has been impelled to take a larger measure of control.”<sup>69</sup> New Deal legislation often enacted the very policies Methodist women had pushed at local and state levels over the previous twenty years. One historian contends that the Great Depression “revealed the inability of American religious institutions to care for the needy in the midst of crisis, and it opened new opportunities for the state to take on the burden instead.”<sup>70</sup> But unlike other religious leaders that resisted the intrusion of the state at the expense of their own authority, the women of the WMC fully embraced it. Bertha Newell explained to WMC members in 1939 how the preservation of “general welfare” was enshrined in the constitution. There was a time, Newell admitted, that general welfare was “largely promoted by the town meetings...by local boards and village fathers...by private initiative through charity, and in large measure through the charities of the churches.” But more

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<sup>68</sup> Wood, “Emancipating the Child Laborer: Children, Freedom, and the Moral Boundaries of the Market in the United States, 1853-1938,” 333.

<sup>69</sup> Newell, “Widening Our National Outlook,” 6.

<sup>70</sup> Greene, *No Depression in Heaven*, 3.

and more, Newell argued, general welfare “has come...to fall within the guidance of the Federal Government.”<sup>71</sup>

The WMC stayed true to their commitment to federal intervention for child welfare in their support of the Social Security Act (SSA) of 1935 and the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1937. The Social Security Act addressed many of the outcomes of weak families the Status of Women Committee had noted, such as old-age assistance and unemployment compensation. The SSA also, as Bertha Newell explained to members, established aid for dependent children and a foster care system. She used the story of “Mrs. Klutz’ two little boys” to highlight the benefits of the SSA. Mrs. Klutz had been deemed unfit to care for her sons and so they had been sent to a state reform school. Under the SSA, such cases could be cared for in foster homes, with financial assistance from the state. When families failed to adequately care for their children, the government could intervene. Newell also pointed out that the SSA revived the work of the Children’s Bureau, which the WMC had long supported, and provided “great assistance to Southern states...where doctors are few and money scarce, where trained nursing help is impossible to be had in child birth and where the state has scant resources for conducting maternity and infancy clinics.” In one fell swoop, the SSA succeeded in creating resources – direct financial aid for mothers and children as well as maternal and infant medical care – nationally that the WMC had worked for years to create at local and state levels.<sup>72</sup> In the 1937 report of the Committee on Industrial Relations, Mrs. I. Morris noted that the women were still fighting on all levels for ratification of the child labor amendment, but “one cause for rejoicing is the enactment of the Social Security Act.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Newell, “Widening Our National Outlook,” 3.

<sup>72</sup> Newell, 8–9.

<sup>73</sup> “Twenty Sixth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1936), 151.

The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1937 further addressed many of the threats to the family, establishing a minimum wage and a maximum hour limit. The many years of child labor struggle finally came to fruition with the passage of the FLSA, which was substantively identical to the Keating-Owen Act, passed over two decades prior. Child labor reformers supported the FLSA with some reluctance, disappointed by its many exemptions for children working in agriculture or for their parents, among others. Though the provisions in the FLSA were not new, they did “reflect the legacy of the movement to end child labor.” The FLSA was not what reformers would have chosen, but it represented a victory for child labor reform, a victory ultimately upheld by the Supreme Court.<sup>74</sup>

The WMC rallied around the FLSA. Their support of the Act came as part of a larger push of their members to support New Deal policies. The Depression had shown past efforts were not sufficient to meet the needs of citizens. The SSA and FLSA both addressed issues long important to the WMC, mitigating many of the threats to child welfare and providing resources for the health and success of families. Unlike their male counterparts in the Methodist church, the WMC did not see this legislation as supplanting their own work with and for children. In many ways, the women of the WMC were better equipped philosophically to face the realities of the Great Depression than the men of the church. The work of deaconesses and home missionaries over the previous decades had provided insight into the lives of the poor and working class for even the most sheltered WMC member, giving them an intimate understanding of the deep need for systemic solutions. Their charitable efforts among working-class children would continue. But in their bid to provide the best possible future for southern children, they happily welcomed the assistance of the federal government to make that vision a reality.

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<sup>74</sup> Wood, “Emancipating the Child Laborer: Children, Freedom, and the Moral Boundaries of the Market in the United States, 1853-1938,” 334–37.

Even after the passage of the FLSA, the WMC continued to support a federal child labor amendment. They maintained organizational membership in the American Association for Labor Legislation and the National Child Labor Committee throughout the 1930s. Local auxiliaries and conferences reported their efforts to convince legislators to support ratification. In 1938, for instance, the Memphis conference wrote that ““Despite flood conditions, forty-one letters were written legislators calling for ratification of the Child Labor Amendment, six to the Governor and four telegrams.””<sup>75</sup> In 1939, the final year of the WMC, the organization endorsed yet another child labor amendment bill. Thelma Stevens, the Superintendent of the Bureau of Christian Social Relations, wrote to the Auxiliary Superintendents of the local committees, “We recommend...that we support the Senator Arthur Vandenberg’s Bill for a Child Labor Amendment: the Amendment is: “The Congress shall have power to limit and prohibit the employment for hire of persons under sixteen years of age.””<sup>76</sup> Though the FLSA had addressed many concerns of child labor advocates, the WMC had not given up on a wholesale ban of child labor, possible only through a constitutional amendment.

At the close of the Great Depression, the WMC had seen many tangible benefits to the family realized. Child labor, though not eradicated entirely, was much handicapped. Adults finally worked with the benefit of a minimum wage and limits to the work day. The government aided those who needed it most – the elderly, widows, disabled children. These laws addressing economic situations also intervened directly into the lives of families in unprecedented ways, making the government, not the church, the center of this new welfare state. The WMC, through their long experience with the working class, had concluded that this was the best solution for

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<sup>75</sup> “Twenty Eighth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1938), 147–48.

<sup>76</sup> Stevens, “To Auxiliary Superintendents of Christian Social Relations,” Third Quarter 1939, 4.

children's welfare. Parents could not always be trusted to care for children. The WMC had often pressured parents to send their children away to institutions the women perceived as better suited to the care of children, and they ultimately supported legislation that gave the government the right to do the same. In this way, the SSA and FLSA represented the triumph of the WMC's dual solution to child welfare: respond to the economic threats to the family and, when right still did not prevail in the home, use the power of the government to intervene in the family environment. Ultimately, their embrace of the New Deal demonstrates how far the WMC was willing to go on behalf of children. Though certainly buoyed by their race and class, the women had little to lose socially by the creation of the welfare state, and in their minds, all was worth the wellbeing of children. As the South changed rapidly in the beginning of the twentieth century, white Methodist women fought to preserve their country's future by using the state to enforce a version of the family from the past. "The child is the citizen of the future and has rights that society cannot afford to neglect," wrote Mabel Howell in 1917, "The rights of childhood must be secured by others – that is, by society itself." When the family unit failed, society – led by Methodist churchwomen – were there to step in to take its place.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Howell, "Social Legislation Regarding Childhood," 1.

### Chapter Three

“It is the system which is wrong:” Rural People, Tenant Farming, and the Rise of the New Deal

In their 1920 annual report on home missions, WMC secretaries Downs and McCoy were blunt: “Our country Churches are dying.”<sup>1</sup> Their membership numbers had dwindled. Holiness and Pentecostal movements were leeching membership away from their churches. There was a spiritual sickness, as the church failed to provide adequate preachers or Sunday school teachers. The women of the WMC worried that rural areas lacked the robust churches necessary to edify the people. But flagging church membership was indicative of deeper, more worrisome problems. The few members remaining faced low wages and poor health. The physical demands of farm life as well as members’ economic difficulties kept people away from church services. The WMC saw the physical wellbeing of rural people as intimately tied to spiritual growth; a farmer who was healthy, well-paid, and happy was much more likely to attend church. “Is it not time,” Downs and McCoy asked of their members, “to think of woman’s work in Home Missions as interwoven with the dying country Church and the unevangelized ones who live in the lonely isolation of the small tenant farm?”<sup>2</sup>

Beginning at the end of World War I, the WMC committed to rural work for the first time. Though the women had long dedicated resources and workers to urban areas, the Great War illuminated the crisis industrialism was causing in the countryside. The rapid industrialization of the country and the changes it brought to the South created a new, deeply bureaucratic and corporate capitalism that challenged the independence and self-determination of

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<sup>1</sup> “Tenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1920), 89.

<sup>2</sup> “Tenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 89.



Anglo-Saxon Protestantism.<sup>3</sup> Americans were increasingly lured from the countryside by the promise of a new life in factories and mills, only to meet low wages, long hours, and dangerous conditions. Teeming with violence and unrest, cities bulged with new arrivals seeking work – immigrants, white people from the countryside, and black people fleeing rural areas.<sup>4</sup> The WMC also noted with alarm their decreasing rural numbers and the impending threat of new church sects siphoning their members away. It is no coincidence, then, that this decade would mark a commitment to rural people for the first time.

The WMC was particularly concerned about keeping the Anglo-Saxon farmers who owned small plots of land or rented from large landowners on their land. These men and women had been trodden upon by big agribusiness, forced off fertile land and into unfair tenant contracts. Their deaconesses and home workers in urban Wesley Houses had seen firsthand what happened to white families who left their lives in the country to pursue new opportunities working in factories, and the women of the WMC were determined to protect white farmers from this fate. By focusing on white farmers, the WMC sought to preserve a side of America that was being bled dry by rising industrialism. One WMC writer summed up this attitude well in 1921, writing, “The white tenant of the South is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. No finer blood ever flushed a brain or stirred a soul than that which circulates in our tenantry.” If the WMC could improve conditions for these farmers, they could protect the farmer from industrialism, big agri-business, and the corruption of the cities.

This chapter examines the twenty years the WMC worked to improve rural life in ways that would dampen the siren call of urbanization and industrialization, steady their churches, and

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<sup>3</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, 1st ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 300–301.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy K. MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*, Oxford Paperbacks (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 39.

protect the rural farmer. Economic security might have been difficult to find in the rural countryside, but at least there, people were far removed from the moral degradation prevalent in the cities. The women were students of the social gospel, embracing a vision of God's kingdom on earth in which physical needs were as important as spiritual ones. Hungry, desperate people were harder to get into church pews. Only by meeting the physical needs of country people could Methodist women hope to stem the flow of members out of their churches and auxiliaries. To meet those needs, the women worked to improve their education, health, and living conditions. They sent out deaconesses, established new Wesley Houses, and worked to increase the number of rural WMC auxiliaries. The WMC pursued the economic uplift of their brothers and sisters living outside the cities and pushed for education, job training, and agricultural development through their church's home mission projects and through state and local governments.

In addition to projects that helped all rural people, the WMC worked to help white farmers, usually tenant farmers and sometimes small landowners, stay on their land, an idea rooted in New Conservationism. In the early twentieth century, New Conservationists believed that the small farmer could be saved if he was taught how to farm and use land correctly and given access to natural resources. According to historian Sarah Phillips, New Conservationists argued that land "should be protected and used correctly not just for its own or for efficiency's sake, but to raise the living standards of the people living on it."<sup>5</sup> They advocated against the interests of big agribusiness, which believed that the small farmer would never be successful and would earn better wages in a factory. Fearful of the corruption wrought by industrialism, the WMC spurned the solutions offered up by these powerful agricultural interests – out-migration and urbanization. By reforming the tenant system, farmers could stay on their land. And by

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 46.

bettering living conditions, increasing access to education and health care, and growing their churches, the WMC could help all rural people prosper without encouraging them to move to cities or take industrial jobs.

In their bid to improve the plight of rural people, the WMC was forced to face the class disparities in their own organization. Practically every area of WMC work involved white middle- and upper-class WMC leaders responding to the needs of working people, white and black. However, rural work was complicated by the fact that the WMC ran auxiliaries in rural areas, populated by rural Methodist women. Unlike in their missions to blacks or immigrants, the very people they sought to help paid dues to their organization. The WMC struggled to navigate this dynamic, at times treating rural women as the poor, illiterate cousins of the larger WMC. Into the 1930s, however, WMC leaders began facilitating more affective collaborations between rural and urban auxiliaries and listening to rural members who identified problems and potential solutions. All this work was vital, as it supported the fledgling work of deaconesses and gave the WMC a stronger foothold in and understanding of the rural South.

In particular, the work of deaconesses and rural auxiliaries laid bare the desperate situation for white tenant farmers and small landowners. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the WMC remained committed to helping these farmers stay on their land. Increasingly, however, they realized how limited their contributions to long-term systemic solutions for farmers were without the aid of the government. Thus, the WMC was fully prepared to support the drastic and unprecedented intervention of the state through New Deal policies. They supported New Deal legislation that would help small-time farmers stay on their land. Unlike their male counterparts in the Methodist church who spurned the New Deal by the close of the 1930s, the WMC never wavered in its support. They were too familiar with the dire conditions caused by the Great

Depression to worry about how the New Deal might threaten their racial and class authority, such as it was for white women.

The middle-class, white women that ran the WMC expressed their anxiety over the industrializing South through their rhetoric and action regarding the spiritual and physical revival of rural people and the scattered Methodist churches that served them. As urban conquered rural and the class and racial hierarchies of the early twentieth century rapidly changed around them, white women worked for spiritual enlargement, temporal progress, and the preservation of white, American farms. In the end, however, the WMC turned to the federal government to create meaningful, lasting change. Thus, this chapter reveals how WMC leadership translated concern for the rapid changes brought on by industrialism into a full-throated embrace of a federal welfare state that not only intervened in city and factory but in the old ways of American life found in the countryside.

Rural work for the WMC began just at the end of World War I. In 1918, the WMC leadership looked more closely at their rural auxiliaries and found them wanting. Low membership, poor leadership, and weak connections to the national chapter made for a rural crisis. In the 1918 Annual Report the home base secretary, Mrs. B. W. Lipscomb, reported that the organizations in rural districts were in a precarious state. She explained that often these organizations only existed either because the pastor or his wife was particularly interested in missions or because a woman knowledgeable about mission work happened to temporarily live there and start a local organization. Without these serendipitous leaders, Lipscomb was not confident the rural organizations could survive, explaining that the WMC literature was often too difficult and their organization too complex for rural rank and file members to understand.

Rural auxiliaries struggled to find a place in a Methodist Church that was rapidly changing in the early twentieth century. By the 1900s, both main branches of Methodism in the United States had taken a significant turn from their rural, egalitarian roots. Historian Morris Davis describes this as a “dramatic shift from a largely rural, working-class, countercultural spiritual movement to a mainstream, male-dominated, politically powerful wealthy national Christian church.” Davis argues that the many efforts throughout the early 1900s to unify the MEC and MECS once more were reflective of Methodist leadership’s understanding that theirs was a powerful church made more powerful by unification. Unlike other evangelical denominations that feared the nation was abandoning “a divinely instituted course or destiny,” Methodists embraced what they had to offer government and the nation. The powerful men appointed to pursue unification beginning in 1910 readily accepted how their denomination had changed and boldly moved forward in their bid to create a national church that played a significant role in politics, government, and industry.<sup>6</sup>

Like the male leadership of the denomination, WMC leaders were also usually middle- and upper-class living in towns and cities. The makeup of the leadership belies the actual demographics of Methodist membership. According to historian John Patrick McDowell, “As late as 1926, approximately two-thirds of the denomination’s members lived in rural areas and a large percentage of its churches were located there.”<sup>7</sup> WMC membership also required annual dues of \$2.40, as well as contributions to the Conference Expense Fund and Retirement and Relief Fund from each member.<sup>8</sup> This dues structure contributed to a woman’s organization that was even more elite than the rest of the denomination.

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<sup>6</sup> Morris L. Davis, *The Methodist Unification: Christianity and the Politics of Race in the Jim Crow Era*, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 5-8.

<sup>7</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 50.

<sup>8</sup> “Thirteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 330.

Yet the women of the WMC still saw the value in preserving their rural connections. As the leadership of the MECS changed in stature and class, the WMC attempted to reconcile the working-class, rural membership with the more powerful, dominant middle-class members in towns and cities. In her 1918 report, Lipscomb suggested what amounted to an inter-denominational mission, a “country drive” to help cultivate these “outlying neighborhoods.” The involvement of more established auxiliaries in towns and cities could help rural chapters survive and prosper. At the very least, Lipscomb pointed out, country women, made prosperous by the war’s impact on farming, could contribute liberally to the WMC’s budgets.<sup>9</sup> A year later, Lipscomb’s 1919 report did not mention rural work explicitly, but she wrote that, “It is a remote district indeed in which there has been no attempt to organize a missionary society.” Lipscomb acknowledged that many organizations in remote areas were in fact reorganizations, possible only when “adequate leadership” was available. But these distant chapters could still have success. Lipscomb shared her experience at a recent conference meeting, “when a strong and well-organized society made a liberal pledge.” A leader of that particular conference shared with Lipscomb, “That society was organized in a tent when the congregation did not even have a house of worship.” Lipscomb’s encouragement that “other weak and unpromising societies shall wax strong” could be read as a message that these rural enterprises could become like urban ones – with adequate leadership. Though a society may start in a tent, there was hope that they could grow to represent more middle-class ideas of church and organization.

The rhetoric and writings of the WMC regarding rural people, in which they sought to teach readers about rural problems, demonstrate the class disparities in rural and urban auxiliaries. In the August 1920 meeting, auxiliaries – rural and urban – were asked to study “The

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<sup>9</sup> “Eighth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN, 1918), 137.

Rural Community.” The agenda advised members to pray “For development of Christian leadership in the rural communities; for the opening of the eyes of people in these communities that they may see the beauty of the life about them, the possibilities for growth, and the opportunities that are theirs in the new world-tasks of peace.”<sup>10</sup> These words would have been read by the very rural chapter leaders the WMC was supposed to pray into existence. Indeed, the bulk of WMC publications regarding rural work was clearly written for urban, middle-class members. In a 1921 publication on tenant farming, for instance, Bertha Newell criticized those who would say “if he were other than he is he would not be a tenant.” She suggested that her readers attempt to empathize with the tenant farmer, put themselves in his place, and “measure the dread prospect for you and your children by a lifetime of reality.”<sup>11</sup> This directive reinforces the likelihood that Newell wrote for city readers or higher-class rural members, who would not be intimately familiar with the realities faced by tenant farmers. In short, the WMC publications explained how city women could save rural women, but these writings were read by both groups. This tension, played out over two decades of rural work, was a microcosm of changing class dynamics in the MECS and the South. As the majority of the leadership of the WMC found themselves comfortably in the middle class, they had difficulty articulating how their organization maintained room for white, working-class women.

The 1920 report on rural auxiliaries seemed to alert the WMC to a crisis growing in the countryside. For the first time, the organization assigned deaconesses to rural areas, and their reports depicted people in great need of spiritual and physical aid. Rural auxiliaries lacked adequate leadership, but they also lacked members. The poverty in rural areas, combined with

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<sup>10</sup> “Yearbook: The Christward Movement of the World” (Nashville, TN, 1920), 11, Adult Year Book 1920-1921, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

<sup>11</sup> Bertha Newell, “Tenancy in the Rural Community” (March 1921), 8, Adult Year Book 1920-1921, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

the itinerancy common in tenant farming, meant poor church attendance and little time or interest in ancillary organizations. In 1920, Mrs. E. B. Steele outlined WMC concerns about rural churches in “The Rural Community and the Country Church.” Steele argued that the economic health of local citizens was closely tied to the health of churches – in attendance, participation, and leadership. “Tired, overworked men and boys, to say nothing of the women, whose hours are always longer than the men’s, cannot worship with any zeal.” WMC advocacy for rural advancement in terms of labor, health, and education could serve a dual purpose of bettering the lives of rural people as well as swelling the church membership rolls. The WMC recognized that if people’s physical and immediate issues could be resolved first, spiritual reform and commitment would more easily follow. Steele wrote, “For as the people of any community become more enlightened and better organized for their temporal welfare, it becomes easier to properly relate them to their greater obligations and to make them feel that they too have a part, and a real part, in the betterment of the whole world.”<sup>12</sup>

The WMC knew that church attendance was closely related to the realities of farming. Steele referenced the 1915 Interchurch World Movement Rural Survey, which had discovered a correlation between church attendance and the size of a man’s farm. Tenant farmers in Missouri were only half as likely to attend church regularly as those who owned their land. The report referred to churches of one hundred members or smaller as “hopeless membership,” destined in all likelihood to die out. Concern for the souls of small farmers touched on a larger concern about the health of rural churches and their ability to survive in the face of small membership rolls. The WMC blamed farming’s long hours and unforgiving workload for driving people away from both the church and from farming. Rural Methodist churches were also threatened by new

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<sup>12</sup> Mrs. E. B. Steele, “The Rural Community and the Country Church” (August 1920), 5, 10, Adult Year Book 1920-1921, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.



holiness and Pentecostal sects, which championed seasonal, revival-driven religious experiences that worked well with the farming schedules. The WMC criticized informal revivals, telling members “the spasmodic revival in the summer when the ‘crops are laid by’ becomes the annual religious feast of many rural communities, and when the work day is on again they cease to worship.” “Open country Churches” – a mainstay of holiness sects – were even worse than those congregations in small towns in terms of membership and “arrested development.”<sup>13</sup>

Many large denominations in the South struggled to maintain denominational ties with congregations in rural areas. A country church may have had “Methodist” on its sign, but it likely had few ties to the MEC or the MECS and little, if any, awareness of what the denomination was doing. The WMC’s attitude toward their rural members was common amongst wealthy and middle-class residents of the South, who according to historian Alison Greene “often assumed that the migratory labor force and the working poor did not care for church because they did not attend regular services or fill the pews of the buildings they had.” This attitude resulted from a fundamental misunderstanding of how rural people viewed church. Particularly in areas of the South where rural people moved a great deal seeking work or tenancy on new plantations, the traditional church building did not make sense. Neither building nor preacher was necessary for a church service in the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta, largely for the simple reason that they often were not available. The large denominations, including the MECS, fretted over the popularity of holiness and Pentecostal sects amongst tenant farmers and wage laborers. The distinct features of rural churches – informal church bodies, outdoor gatherings, itinerant preacher or no preacher at all, and unique worship styles – characterized

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<sup>13</sup> Steele, 6–7.

both black and white churches. In fact, these churches, segregated though they were, “had more in common with each other than with established churches of either race.”<sup>14</sup>

Pentecostalism presented a unique problem to all the mainstream denominations in the South. The sect’s focus on evocative, emotional worship, openness to women and African Americans, and cultural accessibility for the poor and working-class posed a threat to both the membership rolls of Methodist congregations and the racial, gender, and class hierarchies the MECS had established. The WMC never explicitly discussed Pentecostal or holiness sects, but their anxiety over these churches’ influence among rural members is clearly laid out in their discussion of the rural church problem. In veiled language, the WMC decried the features of Pentecostal sects as detrimental to the spiritual and moral health of rural people. Steele used the Interchurch World Movement Rural Survey to methodically repudiate the features that made the Pentecostal movement appealing. The circuit system, in which ministers lived in towns but visited country churches sporadically, “indicates that in the early future we will suffer a loss of many country churches. There are not enough people to carry them.” Without pastoral residence in these small towns, the churches failed to reach their potential as community centers and hubs of Christian opinion. In a pointed rebuke of the holiness movement, Steele argued that “Over-emphasis on emotional types of religion often leads to too great dependence upon the annual revival to satisfy the religious needs of the community and to enlarge Church membership.”

In order to combat the exodus from their churches, the WMC pursued economic solutions to spiritual problems. It would be difficult to convince a farmer whose head was barely above water to sacrifice valuable work hours to attend church regularly. But a more economically secure farmer might be less tempted by the holiness revivals. Steele cited a book, *Six Thousand*

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<sup>14</sup> Alison Collis Greene, *No Depression in Heaven: The Great Depression, the New Deal, and the Transformation of Religion in the Delta* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 40–44.

*Country Churches* by Rev. C. O. Gill, as further evidence that “emotional” religion was not just a threat to more traditional denominations but to the very moral fabric of the rural population. His work shows, Steele asserted, “that illiteracy, illegitimacy, crime, and physical degeneracy correspond in their frequency to the decay of the country Church and the substitution for it of an emotional, irresponsible religious type – a great danger to Protestantism and Americanism.”<sup>15</sup> Because rural people were poor, uneducated, and unhealthy, they were more likely to be tempted by “emotional” religion.

As such, the organization established a commitment to reforming tenant farming. Writing just one year after Steele’s treatise on the country church, Bertha Payne Newell crafted the organization’s stance on farm tenancy in her 1921 publication “Tenancy in the Rural Community.” Building on Steele’s findings that the reality of farmers’ lives stunted their spiritual lives, Newell firmly believed that the perils of tenant farming were the root of rural problems. Reforming tenant farming was the most sensible path to economic security and, in turn, greater church attendance. Newell was a leader in the organization for several decades. Newell was born in Wisconsin but after marrying a southern Methodist minister moved to North Carolina, where she was heavily involved in the WMC. She served as the WMC’s Superintendent of Social Service (later renamed the Bureau of Christian Social Relations) for nearly twenty years as well as the secretary of the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching.<sup>16</sup> Her writing was often featured in WMC publications, and she played an important role in driving rural work priorities for the WMC in the 1920s and 1930s.

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<sup>15</sup> Steele, “The Rural Community and the Country Church,” 8–9.

<sup>16</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign against Lynching* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1974), 176, 312–13n38.

Newell portrayed tenantry as a betrayal of the American ideal, in which millions of Europeans immigrated to the new world in the hopes of owning their own land. Newell's depiction of tenant farmers in her writings reflected a general WMC belief that the people of the rural South were inherently good but had the misfortune of circumstance. Tenant farmers, who in the WMC imagination were almost always white, were hard-working Americans, committed to caring for their land and family. But they were prevented from ever succeeding by a system that actively worked against them. Unfair contracts, greedy landowners, and wasted soil trapped farmers in a cycle of poverty that they would never be able to break unless the system was changed.

By focusing on white tenant farmers, the WMC avoided reckoning with the economic plight of African Americans, a reality they staunchly avoided in almost every aspect of their work. According to historian Nancy Maclean, white renters were more akin to skilled craftsmen, as they often owned their own tools, had more freedom from supervision, and had greater potential to acquire their own land. The interests of tenant farmers, then, aligned more closely with that of small landowners.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the WMC could focus on helping white tenant farmers maintain economic security and perhaps move up the social hierarchy of the South.

Newell's discussion of tenant farming was entrenched in New Conservationist ideas. She wrote in 1921, "As all wealth must come out of the land, the exhaustion of the so-called natural resources is the worst economic calamity that can befall us."<sup>18</sup> As "free lands" disappeared, the value of the land skyrocketed, pricing out average farmers: "As population increases the land will become more valuable, the landlord more powerful, and the tenant more helpless." Even worse, Newell explained, huge tracts of land were being taken over by "soulless corporations."

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<sup>17</sup> MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Newell, "Tenancy in the Rural Community" 7.

Newell dismissed promises of “beneficent management” by pointing out the current conditions in the economically similar setup of company towns and company owned mining districts.<sup>19</sup> This was a shrewd evaluation by Newell, as historian Jarod Roll explains, “Where [corporate owners] decided to plant crops rather than leave the land fallow, they demanded higher rents or larger crop shares from the cash and share tenants who subcontracted their land.” They also took up the practice of hiring wage laborers to work the land, shutting out tenant farmers entirely.<sup>20</sup>

Newell adeptly explained how tenant farming would never lead to success for the farmer. The landlord and tenant, though bound together by a contract, had different and competing interests that made mutual success impossible. The landlord’s interest was in the land and its inherent value, a perpetual interest. However, the tenant, confined to a one-year contract, was interested in the crop and the profit he hoped to make of it. Thus, his interest was limited to a one-year period. Tenant farmers naturally pursued the crops that would make the most profit, with little to no attention to how these crops affected the soil for subsequent crops. After all, any improvements to the land only increased the value of the land and thus the rent the landowner could charge. Regardless, a one-year contract had no chance of adequately supporting a farmer and his family, “so the ancient farm house has become a ruin, the barn a shack, and primitive machinery, or none, hasten soil erosion and reduced production.” The result of tenantry was nonproduction, as fields would eventually run fallow. Ultimately, tenant farming amounted to its own kind of migrant work. Newell cited a statistic that a tenant farmer remained on a farm for an average of eighteen months. A poor farmer moved on to even worse land, while a successful farmer moved on to better land when his current land was exhausted and “proceeds to drain

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<sup>19</sup> Newell, 6–8.

<sup>20</sup> Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 80.

further gains from the bleeding heart of nature.” Either way, the tenant farmer could never succeed in turning his work into wealth.<sup>21</sup>

Tenant farming affected rural people off their farms as well. When farmers moved on to a new opportunity, their children moved schools, disrupting education that was already limited by the farm calendar. A farmer without community ties or kinship networks “loses interest in all public questions and ceases to be a factor in the world’s progress.” Without relational ties to the communities in which they live, farmers would not vote for taxes that help the larger community. Their children, unable to keep pace after many moves, lost interest in school. The result was a cycle of limited education and opportunity.<sup>22</sup>

This narrative is complicated even further, however, by Newell’s general condemnation of white landowners for being staunchly opposed to any progress or community development in order to maintain a system that financially benefited them. She calls tenant farming a form of autocracy and the landowners in the South a “parasitic class.” Newell called on WMC members to “reach the absentee landlord” by taking an active role in improving the tenant farmer’s community and making specific overtures to include him as a citizen. WMC members may not have owned any of the land tenants worked, but they could make their opinions known in other ways: “Shame the absentee landlord into retaining the good citizen as tenant and demand that he make conditions more tolerable for him. Make it a personal matter.” WMC literature argued that “government supervision, modern machinery, good roads, and the automobile” could all ease the farmer’s burden and make his work more profitable. Newell also believed WMC members could pressure the landholding class to lengthen contract periods. Newell was blunt: “There is no good reason why a tenancy contract should not be for a period of years, with renewal clauses, and thus

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<sup>21</sup> Newell, “Tenancy in the Rural Community,” 7–8.

<sup>22</sup> Newell, 9–11.

attain unto real values. The rights of the man who holds title to the land are not more sacred than the rights of the man who tills the soil.”<sup>23</sup>

Newell argued that the only satisfactory solution to the problem of tenantry was ownership. Other interventions for tenant farmers were mere stopgaps. Poor white farmers would only reach full citizenship when they owned their own land. Newell specifically called for the church to financially support this effort. She pointed out that the United States government had offered loans that would cover half the cost of ownership for a new landowner. If the church would offer the other half of these costs, then the church “could give its own young people a real chance, help the good tenant citizen to become a landowner, eliminate the undesirable of all kinds, build up its own faith, and determine the entire nature of citizenship.” By helping the deserving buy their own land, the church could essentially pull farmers up to the middle class.

Newell offered sweeping solutions for the problem of rural tenantry. Her writings were distributed across the WMC and presumably read and studied by WMC members in city and country alike. However, in the reports submitted by WMC chapters, deaconesses, and home mission workers regarding their work across the South, almost no mention is made of progress or even attempts to make progress for tenant farming. Reforming an entire economic system was beyond the scope of what WMC members could handle. Newell presented a grand reimagining of the rural South, one in which white farmers would own their own land, attend church regularly, and raise their families in security. But the local WMC chapter simply did not have the knowledge or the resources to execute this vision.

The WMC made small inroads to improving the lives, and thus the church membership rolls, in other ways, commissioning deaconesses and home missionaries for rural work

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<sup>23</sup> Newell, 11–12; Steele, “The Rural Community and the Country Church,” 6.

specifically. In the 1920 tract series on rural churches, Steele asked the looming question, “Who will do this?” Answering for her readers, she wrote, “Any one who will consecrate his or her life to this great field and look upon it as a God-given task, equal in every way to reconstruction work in Europe or evangelistic work in China. Those who are young and looking for a field of labor *prepare for it*.”<sup>24</sup> The response was small at first; the WMC commissioned just two rural missionaries in Arkansas and one in Mississippi in the early 1920s. These women were stretched thin, often serving an entire district with multiple churches. But they were trained before their assignments. Many studied at the Scarritt College for Christian Workers in Nashville, which trained lay people for work in the mission field. As a part of this training, Scarritt provided classes on “Home missions, including the principles and methods of home mission work, with special reference to the problems of foreign groups in America, the Negro, Indian, industrial groups, neglected rural communities, and crowded city quarters.” Graduates became foreign missionaries, home missionaries, social service workers, religious education workers, pastors’ assistants, Bible teachers, and directors of music and worship.<sup>25</sup> Rural deaconesses, though technically home missionaries, were a little bit of all of these vocations, teaching Bible classes and leading worship, providing social services, assisting local pastors, and running programs for women and children. Deaconesses founded Junior Leagues, Epworth Leagues for young adults, Sunday schools, and chapters of the Woman’s Missionary Council. The women helped church members put on children’s pageants, Christmas plays, and Vacation Bible Schools, as well as organized small libraries. By building the programming of local churches, deaconesses hoped to at least attract the children and wives of local farmers.

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<sup>24</sup> Steele, “The Rural Community and the Country Church,” 6.

<sup>25</sup> “Fourteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 163.



Rural churches were further hindered by an absence of adequate pastoral leadership, and rural deaconesses did their best to fill the void. Steele complained that though most preachers came from rural areas originally, they worked primarily in the cities. This left many rural churches under the care of circuit preachers, who failed to put down roots in local communities and grow the church as a spiritual and civic center. Steele worried that the absentee preacher did more harm than good: “Nothing has done more to break down community spirit and draw young people away from the farm than such leaders who fly to the city with every nightfall or, at best, every week-end.”<sup>26</sup> Bessie Bunn, a home missionary assigned to the Jonesboro District of the North Arkansas Conference, gently complained in her 1924 annual report that “The Methodist Church in Lepanto is the only Church with a regular pastor in a large territory beyond that. For a community to hear a sermon once a month in a school building is considered doing exceedingly well.”<sup>27</sup> For many residents of rural areas, the deaconess was a far more familiar face than that of the circuit pastor.

Deaconesses also helped support local WMC auxiliaries. Though often small organizations, the deaconesses spoke warmly of the efforts of the local women. For example, deaconess Willena Henry, in the Jonesboro, Arkansas district, reported, “One of the greatest joys of my work among the country people was the woman's missionary society — the faithful half dozen and the heroism of all. Willing to walk in the dust and heat or to come in a wagon, sitting on planks and driving the mules, willing to sweep the church to get money to pay on my salary — these are some of the sacrifices they made.”<sup>28</sup> The local auxiliaries also supported the

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<sup>26</sup> Steele, “The Rural Community and the Country Church,” 5.

<sup>27</sup> “Fourteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 232.

<sup>28</sup> “Fourteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 231.

deaconesses, giving them more time and resources to dedicate to the children, young people, and women in the rural Methodist Church.

In turn, deaconesses helped facilitate relationships between their churches and auxiliaries and those in larger towns, often resulting in donations and financial aid. In 1920 and 1924, the WMC publications suggested country and city auxiliaries meet together for the monthly meeting dedicated to rural work. The 1920 booklet advised country chapters to “extend an invitation to a neighboring town or city auxiliary to hold a joint program for an all-day meeting,” while the 1924 pamphlet simply noted “an interesting feature would be for societies in cities and towns to hold an all-day meeting in the country with a rural auxiliary.”<sup>29</sup> Women at the conference level supported rural districts with donations. The North Mississippi Conference donated over 300 books to form a circuit library, while the Supply Department of the Little Rock and North Arkansas Conferences sent “many needed supplies” to the Jonesboro district. At times the relationship was simpler yet still showed the economic inequality between city and country. In the Helena, Arkansas district, Minnie Lee Eidson reported, “The Junior Missionary Society sent a modest box to the Orphans' Home at Little Rock and were themselves recipients of a lovely Christmas box from a department of the Sunday school at Helena. Their pleasure over this gift was sweet to see.”<sup>30</sup> Though rural churches and auxiliaries undoubtedly benefitted from these donations, these examples are indicative of the type of one-sided relationship between rural and urban women in the 1920s.

At the end of the 1920s, rural work had expanded a great deal. The WMC now had deaconesses assigned for rural work in six states. In 1929, the WMC appointed the Commission

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<sup>29</sup> “Yearbook: The Christward Movement of the World,” 11, 14; “Yearbook: The Illumined Task” (Nashville, TN, 1924), 12, Adult Year Book 1920-1921, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

<sup>30</sup> “Fifteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 195.

on Rural Work to make “a study of the rural territory of the Church at home.” This was an effort to understand in a systemic way the many problems various WMC leaders had identified over the previous decade. The Commission was tasked with studying “needs for local leadership; economic conditions; educational conditions; religious and moral conditions; recreational conditions; health conditions.” They reported their first findings in 1930, writing, “The huge numbers involved in rural life, the apartness of country folk, and the isolation behind which urgent needs are hidden have caused a relative neglect of rural peoples by the various agencies dealing with human welfare.” The women included their church in this appraisal, pointing out how the innate problems for rural people were compounded by the rural church struggling to survive. “The Church,” wrote the Commission, “which should be the greatest agency of them all sees the decay of the rural life surrounding many Churches and the consequent decay of the Churches because of her inability to send full-time pastors to rural communities who are experienced, trained, and equipped to break the bread of the abundant life to the people.”<sup>31</sup>

The Commission represented a new commitment to rural work, one that went far beyond the Junior Leagues and circuit libraries of the 1920s. This commitment could not have come at a more vital time, as the Great Depression hit the South especially hard, and southern tenant farmers bore the brunt of the economic disaster. This came on the tails of a series of devastating floods off the Mississippi River in the late 1920s and preceded a drought in 1930 that covered the South from Virginia to Texas. Though the depression and the drought stretched the finances of the WMC, the organization took on rural education, living conditions, and healthcare far beyond the scope of the work of the 1920s. In some ways the Depression made the WMC’s work even harder, with the strain on WMC finances and the increased demands of helping destitute

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<sup>31</sup> “Twentieth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1930), 63.

people. But in other ways, the Depression offered an opportunity for the WMC. For possibly the first time, the ideas the WMC and others had advocated for rural people and farmers became central to federal discussions and even New Deal policies. If there was ever a time for systemic economic change for the rural South, the 1930s were it. Hampered by plummeting budgets and pledges during this decade, the WMC entered the 1930s determined to improve the lot of those in the countryside.

During the 1930s, the WMC renewed their commitment to the social gospel, viewing the Depression as an opportunity to reach those within and outside their congregations. Their organization was certainly not exempt from the issues plaguing the nation. Pledges and contributions were down across the various arms of the WMC, and the needs of those hardest hit by the Depression stretched the WMC thin. In 1930, workers submitted reports of distressed and needy people throughout the South. Yet even as the Depression ravaged the communities they were sent to serve, deaconesses explained that material need brought people to the church for both material and spiritual help. Deaconess Annie L. Trawick, head of the Wesley Community House in Meridan, MS reported in 1931,

I have served in Wesley Houses for twenty-four years, but the past year has been an outstanding one. I do not allude to the financial depression or bank failures, but to the wonderful opportunities of service that have come to us at this crucial time. Our people have flocked to us for comfort and advice. It has been our great privilege not only to clothe and feed them, but to point them to the Lamb of God. Our faith has been increased and our vision clearer, and we have "lifted our eyes to the hills of God."<sup>32</sup>

Deaconesses and home missionaries wrote repeatedly of the great demand for food and clothing. The women in St. Louis faced such great demand for clothing, they had to limit requests to children only in most cases. Even with this limitation, they gave clothes daily throughout the fall

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<sup>32</sup> "Twenty First Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council," 195.

and winter of 1930. But these requests for help created opportunities to offer spiritual counsel. A member in Knoxville, TN explained, “Through the Churches we have been able to help some, and by helping them materially it gave us an opportunity to point many to the Great Physician who is able not only to feed the body, but the soul.”<sup>33</sup> Deaconess Dorothea M. Reid, of Chattanooga, TN, commented, “Often we have seen a revival of interest in spiritual things. A real turning away from things of the world to God. This is indeed gratifying.”<sup>34</sup> In this way, the workers on the front lines of the WMC were able to cast the Depression, as debilitating as it was, as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

The church’s long-fought battle to staunch the attrition of rural church membership was exacerbated by the financial strain of the depression. Though deaconesses and home workers often served several rural churches on a conference circuit, the financial reality forced churches in area towns to consolidate. In 1930, the Committee on Findings recommended “That missionary women as members of local congregations work toward a consolidation of small Churches in over-churched areas whenever practicable.” This would specifically look like “one active Protestant Church with a full-time resident pastor for every one thousand inhabitants of one race and speaking a common language.” This strategy, the committee argued, would help the church “enlarge its service to its rural constituents.”<sup>35</sup> According to historian Jarod Roll, however, this strategy often backfired. By forcing rural people out of their country churches and into town to attend service with congregants “who were more prosperous, who wore better clothes, and who expected their middle-class decorum to reign,” the church made rural people feel unwelcome and a “growing sense of spiritual dissatisfaction, even alienation.”<sup>36</sup> The

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<sup>33</sup> “Twenty First Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 198.

<sup>34</sup> “Twenty First Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 181.

<sup>35</sup> “Twentieth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 163.

<sup>36</sup> Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 86.

inevitable result, then, was a loss of church membership. This is another example of the disconnect between the recommendations of church leadership and the realities for rural church members.

As the women of the WMC reflected on the first year of the Great Depression, they focused on what they were able to accomplish despite substantial financial hardship. Mrs. J. W. Perry, then the vice president of the WMC, closed her introduction to the 1931 Annual Report with a blunt summary:

The year just closing has been a testing year. Never has our country suffered greater financial depression. The long, hot summer and the continued drought have occasioned untold hardships and suffering. It was to be expected that these conditions would affect the offerings of the Missionary Societies. In many cases the women have put forth heroic effort, and we come today with no discouragement because of our financial shortage; rather we come rejoicing and with understanding appreciation of the love and loyalty which the offerings of the year represent. The conditions we must face at this time should send us to our knees in earnest supplication and in deeper consecration. We would turn to the future with courage and renewed strength to undertake larger and more heroic tasks in His name.

But the Depression was far from over, and the years following the crash of 1929 forced the WMC to reevaluate which issues they could prioritize. In 1931, the WMC changed their long-held membership policy. Instead of requiring a set amount of dues to be paid in order to obtain membership, the WMC decided to let any woman join by contributing what she was able. This policy swung both ways, as Perry explains, “no woman need be excluded because the required membership dues were prohibitive, and no woman need be restricted in the pledge she makes by a complacent satisfaction in doing what was required. The ability of each member is the measure of the financial obligation.”<sup>37</sup> The women closed 1931 “with a serious financial deficit,” but they

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<sup>37</sup> “Twenty Second Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 48.

pressed on, recruiting new members to take on work that would, hopefully, not require a great monetary output.<sup>38</sup>

In the 1930s, WMC leadership abandoned their more condescending language about growing rural leadership through the intervention of urban auxiliaries. Instead, they pursued programs that encouraged collaboration and mutual benefit. Perhaps this was because of their rural deaconesses' expanded reach; the more familiar the WMC became with an area of need, the more likely they were to respond effectively. The Commission on Rural Development collaborated with district elders to host "District Round-Ups," meetings that "proved most profitable in bringing together the several agencies with the Church and in the community to think together and plan together for the improvement of living conditions." The Commission's report continued, "Emphasis was ever kept on the Church and its responsibility in meeting the needs."<sup>39</sup> Some of these "Round-Ups" delivered results; the Louisville Conference created "a new vision of the district needs and opportunities, and a request for a deaconess or full-time worker was made."<sup>40</sup> The Commission directed local chapters of the WMC to study conditions in the local communities, including evaluating the conditions of schools for black children and the state of water supply and sewage in their communities, collaborating with the Red Cross, the State Boards of Health, and other agencies that could assist health conditions locally, and taking up study of the WMC's "Rural Development packet" and the book *The Rural Billion*.<sup>41</sup> The Committee on Christian Social Relations recommended in 1933 that "each town or city missionary society, through the leadership of its Superintendent of Christian Social Relations,

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<sup>38</sup> "Twenty Second Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council," 85.

<sup>39</sup> "Twenty Second Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council," 144.

<sup>40</sup> "Twenty Third Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council" (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1933), 131.

<sup>41</sup> "Twenty Second Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council," 144-45.

seek to find and adopt a rural missionary society as a sister society, and to work out a program of mutual helpfulness.”<sup>42</sup> In this way, the WMC encouraged local members to be more aware and proactive of conditions in the surrounding rural areas and work with their rural sisters rather than over them. In 1937, the Committee on Rural Development reported that 512 societies had “sister” rural societies and these partnerships cooperated “in lending books and materials; in exchanging programs and speakers; in all-day meetings together; in financial helpfulness, especially in aiding the rural societies by providing curb markets in the city for their products.”<sup>43</sup>

More deaconesses and home workers were sent out in the hope that they could strengthen local rural churches and assist in improving living conditions amongst country people. The early 1920s saw only three deaconesses or home workers dedicated to rural work, but in 1931 rural work was done in ten communities in six states. By 1938 that had grown to ten states. The women continued the work of the 1920s bolstering churches through Vacation Bible Schools and Sunday Schools, establishing and fostering women’s auxiliaries, and cultivating relationships between small congregations and large ones. But they also furthered the issues emphasized by the Commission - education, health, and religious teaching. The rural worker in the North Georgia Conference worked with a local pastor and the State Board of Health to host a tuberculosis clinic, in which thirty-two people were x-rayed and four given special treatment.<sup>44</sup> Obra Rogers, deaconess for Cajun Rural Work in Alabama, cooperated with county nurses to distribute vaccinations for smallpox, typhoid fever, and diphtheria. She also visited homes with the county nurse, where she “gave information concerning pregnant mothers.” And of course, charitable work went on unabated. Rogers reported, “We have necessarily had to do a great deal

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<sup>42</sup> “Twenty Third Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 127.

<sup>43</sup> “Twenty Seventh Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1937), 145.

<sup>44</sup> “Twenty Third Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 221.



of relief work because of the great amount of unemployment. The outstanding piece of relief work has been the giving of noonday meals to the school children.”<sup>45</sup> The realities of the Depression exacerbated the difficulty of advancing other aims.

Through the national directives of the WMC, the diligent work of deaconesses and home workers, and the labor of local WMC chapters, rural work continued throughout the 1930s. The WMC doled out food and clothing for those crippled by the Depression, while they also maintained projects in rural education, health and sanitation, church growth, and religious instruction. The Great Depression added an urgency to rural work, as unemployment and hunger scourged the South. The farmers made wealthy by the Great War, who in Mrs. B. W. Lipscomb’s view could contribute amply to the WMC coffers, were a thing of the past. Yet the plight of farmers was heavy on their minds in this decade. With the onset of the Great Depression, the situation for small landowners and tenant farmers steadily worsened, and the WMC began discussing the fate of farmers with renewed fervor, joining a national conversation about the fate of the nation’s farmers.

In the 1930s, the debate at the national level over the future of small farming came to a head. The Great Depression cast into sharp relief what some policymakers had always known: those who farmed small plots of land or rented from large landowners barely eked out a living at the best of times, let alone when crop prices were in free fall. No one questioned whether this system was sustainable, but fierce debate raged over what to do about it. As historian Sarah T. Phillips explains, “Tension had always existed between those who believed that farmers had to ‘get big or get out’ and those who claimed that more could be done to help farmers remain on the land. The onset of the Depression tipped the balance in favor of the latter.”<sup>46</sup> Many of President

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<sup>45</sup> “Twenty Third Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 222.

<sup>46</sup> Phillips, *This Land, This Nation*, 9.

Roosevelt's New Deal policies and programs, along with the men he appointed to run them, elevated the ideology of New Conservatism, the belief that "rural living standards would improve with proper use and fair distribution of natural resources."<sup>47</sup> Programs like the Agricultural Adjustment Act, Civilian Conservation Corps, Federal Emergency Relief Administration, National Industrial Recovery Act, and the Tennessee Valley Authority all assisted rural farmers. Though these programs pursued different methods and goals, this policy community was held together by "their concern for farm people and their belief that conservation adjustments would restore balance to a diseased economic system."<sup>48</sup> Short-term goals – keeping small farmers on their land and making farming more secure – would inevitably lead to the long-term goal of bringing the nation out of the depression and into a more prosperous future.

The WMC fit neatly into this way of thinking. They had already spent a decade thinking rural farmers were the hope of the nation. The WMC had always held the view that tenantry was the core of the rural problem. By helping tenant farmers, the WMC could improve the countryside in general and even the entire country. Tenantry destroyed fertile land and kept landless farmers in abject poverty, problems that had long-lasting impacts on rural communities, schools, and churches.

The WMC had advocated in the 1920s for government intervention that would teach small farmers, including tenant farmers, how to better use resources and modern farming techniques. They had also pushed churches to partner with government programs to help tenant farmers buy their own land, a form of land redistribution. Even before the Great Depression set in, the WMC elevated farmers as central to the economic fabric of the country. The 1930 report

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<sup>47</sup> Phillips, 75.

<sup>48</sup> Phillips, 79.

from the Commission on Rural Work, written regarding 1929, argued that farmers, not industrial workers, were the backbone of the economy and the champions of conservation:

It was further stated that the success and power of urban and industrial life calls for special attention to the social and religious needs of rural people, for by the work of the farmer is civilization supplied with food and all other soil-grown products. The plant food found in the upper levels of the soil is of more value to humanity than all the minerals and precious stones found in the deep recesses of the earth. If a comparative scale of human values were reasonable, one might be tempted to say of more value than all workers providing for human need and comfort is the farmer, upon whom the utilization and conservation of soil resources depends.<sup>49</sup>

Proponents of New Conservationism believed that the Great Depression was foreshadowed by the agricultural depression of the 1920s. The economic health of the nation, they believed, was contingent on and exemplified by the economic health of farmers. Small farms could be saved, and the economy along with it, only through a commitment to conservation, resource access and management, and training.

The economic evaluations of New Conservationism were bolstered by long-held stereotypes about the American farmer that were central to American mythology. As Phillips puts it, “Ubiquitous invocations of the moral superiority of the American farmer manifested this thinking.”<sup>50</sup> Like the New Conservationists, the WMC portrayed farmers as idyllic bastions of true American heritage. The farmers they discussed were, of course, always white. In fact, Newell had used farmers’ whiteness as a reason readers should be more empathetic to their plight:

The white tenant of the South is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. No finer blood ever flushed a brain or stirred a soul than that which circulates in our tenantry. A million women who are eligible to membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution toil in our rented fields every summer. It is the system which is wrong and not the victim who has failed.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> “Twentieth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 192.

<sup>50</sup> Phillips, *This Land, This Nation*, 79.

<sup>51</sup> Newell, “Tenancy in the Rural Community,” 8.

In this, Newell aligned the WMC with a common trope of the early twentieth century. In ignoring black tenant farmers, Newell reinforced the racial connection between poor white farmers and rich white landowners. A deaconess in the North Mississippi Conference assured readers of her 1924 report, “The population [of the Shuford Circuit], unlike the delta section of Mississippi, is almost entirely white. The people are pure Anglo-Saxons, small farmers, and most of them own their homes... the people are of high character, industrious, physically well developed, and the climate is healthful. The religious and social problems are most of them due to lack of leadership.”<sup>52</sup> This was a common theme in WMC writings during this time. Rural, white farmers were the finest people one could find, and their problems were due to circumstances outside of their control and a failure in church leadership. The Committee on Rural Development made this same observation in 1932, writing, “As there is a relation between economic stability and farmers who are trained for their work and who have a love for rural life, the rural church must have a rural-minded leadership who can awaken in their people an appreciation of the heritage which is theirs.”<sup>53</sup> These stereotypes about small landowners and tenant farmers may have bolstered support for them amongst the WMC and New Conservationists. Regardless, the WMC was attentive to and aware of the very real problems facing rural people and dedicated many resources to trying to bring about positive change.

The early years of New Deal policy focused primarily on large landholders, though some programs like the TVA and the FERA benefitted tenant farmers and sharecroppers. This changed in the latter half of the decade, when policy makers shifted focus to the plight of tenancy. The WMC paid particular attention to the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy, appointed by President Roosevelt in 1936. Roosevelt submitted the findings of this committee to Congress in

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<sup>52</sup> “Fourteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 63.

<sup>53</sup> “Twenty Second Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 144.

February 1937. His evaluation of the state of tenant farming in his letter of transmittal echoed that of the WMC: “The American dream of the family-size farm, owned by the family which operates it, has become more and more remote. The agricultural ladder, on which an energetic young man might ascend from hired man to tenant to independent owner, is no longer serving its purpose.” Roosevelt built this view of tenancy on New Conservationist ideals, explaining, “While aggravated by the depression, the tenancy problem is the accumulated result of generations of unthinking exploitation of our agricultural resources, both land and people.” He also recognized that this was a shift from the original New Deal farm policies, calling this work on farm tenancy and security “a logical continuation of the agricultural program this administration has been developing since March 4, 1933.” Roosevelt, acknowledging that Congress would be the ones to devise the plan, still emphasized that it would fit into his existing policies – “closely integrated with existing activities for maintaining farm income and for conserving and improving our agricultural resources.”<sup>54</sup>

The actual report of the committee is strikingly like the writings of the WMC over the preceding fifteen years, both in their assessment of the causes of the problem and their recommended solutions, albeit with more detail. The committee made several recommendations to Congress for solving the crisis facing tenants, sharecroppers, farm laborers, and small landowners in debt or with landholdings too small for profit. These suggestions, made with “the entire agricultural ladder in view,” were meant to serve two purposes, to “facilitate movement upward from rung to rung by farmers who are prepared to take such steps” and to “increase security on each of the ladder’s various rungs.” At the federal level, the actions recommended by the committee were intended “to facilitate farm-home ownership and to help existing owners

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<sup>54</sup> United States, “Farm Tenancy: Message from the President of the United States Transmitting the Report of the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy” (Washington: US Government, 1937), iii–iv.

keep their farms, measures for the rehabilitation of groups not now prepared to take over their own farms, certain suggestions for improving the condition of laborers, a program for aiding families stranded on submarginal land and taking such land out of cultivation, and proposals for the discouragement of speculation in farm lands.” Much centered on the need for ownership, which Newell had championed over a decade prior. And much like Newell’s suggestion that churches step in with the funds necessary for tenants to buy their land, the committee outlined the need for liberal credit over long terms, for those with the ability and experiences required for land ownership. They also recommended modest loans accompanied by guidance and education that would prevent small landholders from slipping into tenancy and would allow tenants, presumably those not ready for land ownership, to improve their standard of living. They also echoed Newell’s call for fairer, more advantageous lease contracts. And of equal importance, this report acknowledged the need for simultaneous action on education and health, central tenets of WMC rural work. The analysis of the special committee could have been just as easily found in WMC reports: “The ignorance, poverty, malnutrition, morbidity, and social discriminations by which many farm tenant families are handicapped cannot be eliminated by converting tenants into farm owners under some system of easy credit.”<sup>55</sup>

As the committee’s report followed so closely the ideas already espoused by the WMC, it is unsurprising that the organization highlighted the findings in their 1937 Annual Report. The Christian Social Relations division of the WMC, led by none other than Bertha Newell, made the report of the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy central to their instructions for rural development, recommending to WMC chapters:

That auxiliary and conference superintendents keep in close touch with the recommendations to Congress from the President’s Committee on Farm Tenancy; that

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<sup>55</sup> United States, 9–10.

they write at once to the National Resource Committee, Washington D.C., and secure a copy of the report of the Committee; that they seek to promote the study and discussion of the report; and that they support such measures arising from the report as are in keeping with sound social justice and Christian principles.<sup>56</sup>

The Committee on Farm Tenancy published their report in time for it to influence legislation in 1937. Similarly, the WMC pushed out the report to their members in time for local chapters to advocate for that legislation – the “measures arising from the report.” Newell’s ideas, found so readily in the report, could have had actual influence with the committee. She was invited to attend the “Washington Conference on the Farm Tenancy Situation under the auspices of the Resettlement Administration,” a conference the committee was aware of as it cited its recommendations in a footnote.<sup>57</sup> In this same year, the Committee on Rural Development requested that the WMC “appoint a research committee to investigate and report on the feasibility and possibility of an experimental cooperative farm for the benefit of the sharecropper.” 1937 was a high point in WMC intervention for tenant farmers.

The new administrative emphasis on tenant farmers yielded results. In July 1937, Congress passed the Bankhead-Jones (Farm Security) Act, which included many of the report’s recommendations. In September, Henry Wallace, Roosevelt’s Secretary of Agriculture, created the Farm Security Administration. By providing loans to help tenants become owners, the FSA fulfilled one of the core tenets of Newell’s argument made back in 1921. The FSA’s Rural Rehabilitation program provided rehabilitation grants and loans to “higher-risk” families, the bulk of which were in the South. They accompanied these funds with technical guidance and conservation assistance, fulfilling another of the committee and Newell’s recommendations. Sarah T. Phillips argued about this program, “Though the FSA never acquired the funds or the

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<sup>56</sup> “Twenty Seventh Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 134.

<sup>57</sup> “Twenty Seventh Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 144; Newell, “Tenancy in the Rural Community,” 18.

political support to wage a full-scale war on rural poverty, its existence indicated the country's willingness, at least for a time, to experiment with remedies for poor people and poor land, and to confront economic and political inequality in the countryside."<sup>58</sup> Newell and the WMC had talked about this kind of large-scale intervention for almost two decades, but the federal government offered the resources and means to actually put it into practice.

The opportunity provided by New Deal policies was not lost on the WMC. In the summer of 1937, the WMC held two Rural Women's Conferences at Mount Sequoyah in Arkansas and at Lake Junaluska in North Carolina. Three members of the Rural Development Committee attended each conference, with the goal "to learn from the rural leaders themselves what was needed and possible along lines of rural work." In total, 173 district secretaries and 60 conference officers participated. The findings of the conferences aligned, in many ways, with the same problems and issues that the WMC had discussed for almost two decades: too many unchurched people, a lack of adequate education and healthcare resources, and "tenancy and all of its problems." But the conferences introduced a new opportunity, one provided by the New Deal. The attendees of both conferences identified several agencies that were "seeking to meet these needs," including "State and County Welfare Boards, often financed by the Federal Government, Federal rehabilitation agencies of various kinds, [and] WPA case workers." Their report encouraged churches to work closely with local, state, and federal agencies set up to provide welfare and relief:

The Sequoyah group called attention to the fact that of these agencies working outside the church a very large number are state, county, or federal — that is, Governmental agencies — and that many of them are not permanent agencies but agencies that have arisen during the depression. Recognition was given, however, to the fact that these Governmental programs are deeply Christian in spirit and are founded on Christian principles. Both conferences stressed the decided willingness of those agencies to work

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<sup>58</sup> Phillips, *This Land, This Nation*, 145–46.



through the churches in the accomplishment of their programs and the opportunity thus afforded for co-operation.

But as with much of WMC directives on rural work, the emphasis was on the end goal rather than the practical steps to get there. The report states, “that the help of these agencies is essential in the development of an adequate program of health, education, economic life, etc.” and “that the church cannot ignore these agencies.” The WMC clearly understood that the agencies were the key to the changes they had long sought, and they recognized that the church could play a role. The report found “that the welfare agencies working in the communities welcome the cooperation of the church if the approach is made in the right spirit.” No directives are given as to what this cooperation should look like or what the “right spirit” might be.<sup>59</sup>

The attention to the plight of rural people and farmers proved to be short-lived. The conflict between the New Conservationists and those who favored big agricultural business, which had tilted in favor of the former during the New Deal, tipped back to empower “those who believed there were just too many farmers.” There was still a place for government intervention, for those farmers best able to stay on the land and to expand their operations with government assistance. But increasingly, planners and policymakers began to question whether the poorest rural people would ever be able to compete with landholders. People began to argue that the income of a tenant or very poor farmer would never match those of industrial jobs. Instead, policies that encouraged out-migration, industrialization, and urbanization were the best hope for the economic betterment of small and marginal farmers. World War II provided the opportunity proponents of these ideas needed. The Great Depression, the perfect context for government programs that prioritized poor people and poor land, gave way to brand new problems –

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<sup>59</sup> “Twenty Eighth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 84–86.

commodity shortages, rising prices, and a labor deficit in the countryside. Tenants and marginal farmers gave up the hard life to seek higher wages in booming wartime factories. Suddenly it was the farms that had the labor shortage; according to Phillips, “more farm people left the countryside between 1940 and 1945 than during any other five-year period of the twentieth century.” New Conservationists, in turn, found new projects that served the war effort and helped rural people in new ways. “As a coalition of wealthier farmers and conservative congressmen from the South and West extinguished New Deal efforts to assist tenants, sharecroppers, and migrant workers,” Sarah T. Phillips writes in *This Land, This Nation*, “liberal conservation policy helped to bring about an alternate solution to the problem of the rural poor. Large, multipurpose dam projects powered war factories, drew migrants from the farms, and served as catalysts of regional and industrial growth.”<sup>60</sup> Conservationists turned their attention to a new project for the rural poor, tacitly encouraging out-migration and leaving efforts to keep farmers on the land behind.

The same forces that had caused the WMC’s anxieties about the cities now found their way to the countryside, and the force of rural industrialization proved to be too much for the WMC. Sarah McCracken, a deaconess in South Carolina and chair of the Committee on Home Fields, reported on rural work in 1939, writing, “The rural areas are now feeling...the impact of the changing world factors which until now have been largely felt in urban centers, and the rural problems are those arising out of the maladjustments of the rural situations to these changing factors. The mechanization of life and the ferment of new ideas are causing changes in rural life.” World War II brought the triumph of rural industrialism, and that, combined with changes

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<sup>60</sup> Phillips, *This Land, This Nation*, 10, 199–200, 222.

in leadership in the WMC, brought the organization's great foray into rural economic development to a close.

In late 1937, Bertha Newell, who had served as the superintendent of the Bureau of Christian Social Relations for nearly two decades, was succeeded by Thelma Stevens. Newell still served as a member of the Executive Committee and as the Member at Large for the MECS Committee on Economic Relations in 1938 and 1939, but her work with the WMC seems to have been reduced considerably – understandable, as Newell was in her seventies by this time. Stevens led the Bureau until the MECS reunited with the MEC in 1940, after which she served as the head of the Women's Division of Christian Service until 1968. Rural work continued in the last years of the 1930s, similar in their attention to living conditions, education, and the like. But the commitment to economic renewal faded away. This change might have had to do with the loss of Newell's continued stress on large-scale, practical economic intervention for rural people and farmers. Notably, the Committee on Constitution and By-Laws changed the name of the Committee on Rural Development to the Committee on Rural Community in 1938.<sup>61</sup> Though the official description for the committee did not change – “to study country life problems in America” and “the results of its investigations shall serve as suggestions which shall be carried out through the Bureau of Christian Social Relations” – the change indicates a shift in thinking about rural problems, from creating change to fostering community.<sup>62</sup> The women were also preoccupied with reunification throughout 1939, and, as for all of the nation, the specter and arrival of World War II forced the WMC to redirect their attention and work. Under Stevens, the Bureau and later the Women's Division stridently took on vital issues of the day, including

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<sup>61</sup> “Twenty Eighth Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council,” 190.

<sup>62</sup> “Twenty Eighth Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council,” 191; “Twenty Seventh Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council,” 300.

women's rights and racial equality. But tenant farmers and rural people in general, their plight overshadowed by the end of the Great Depression, the onset of World War II, and the industrial opportunities war provided, never again obtained the level of attention and dedication from Methodist women as they had in the 1930s.

When the WMC took on rural problems for the first time in the 1920s, they did so largely because of their own anxiety about their changing nation. Over the course of twenty years, the WMC initiated practical projects. They commissioned deaconesses and missionaries to work on rural problems specifically, and the annual reports are full of the many things these women accomplished. In the end though, the WMC realized that the broad, systemic changes they knew were necessary would only be possible through the federal government. Thus, they threw their support behind New Deal policies, many of which echoed the very arguments they had made for twenty years. Nonetheless, the WMC struggled to know how to best help rural churches and their members, and the changes they advocated for at the federal level often failed to trickle down to membership. With the onset of World War II, rural people left their farms in droves, in search of higher wages and a better quality of life.

Perhaps this struggle was due in part to the disconnect between WMC leadership's priorities and the actions of local membership. The reports of local activities never matched the heady instructions of the leadership to advocate for legislation and systemic change. Newell acknowledged that economic reform was a difficult area in which to affect change. She wrote in 1937, "The whole world of industry and economics has been in such chaos that even the wisest thinkers and most experienced industrialists and authorities have differed and suffered perplexity. It is not strange then that laywomen should be slower to comprehend their abilities in

promoting welfare in these fields than in some others.”<sup>63</sup> It was one thing for Newell to suggest to members that they help tenant farmers secure funds to buy their land and quite another thing for members to actually do that. It was much easier, and in a sense more immediately rewarding, to help a deaconess set up a Vacation Bible School or donate funds for a church building.

The New Deal, and by proxy the WMC, failed to save rural America, at least in the sense that they failed to keep rural people on their farms and in their country communities. The First World War, the rapid changes in industry, the collapsing race and class structures that brought on the second Ku Klux Klan and a spate of violence – these events caused Methodist women to search for a place to project their anxieties, a place where there was stability to be preserved and heritage to be protected. These anxieties were alleviated, not by actually giving a tenant farmer money to buy land, but by discussing the tenant farmer as a white, Anglo Saxon American, worthy of being saved. The WMC wanted very much to understand rural people and their problems, as evidenced by their many commissions, studies, surveys and continual instruction for city chapters to visit rural ones. But the result was not a true understanding of rural America but a reduction of people there to a mission field. As their cities grew larger, the cotton mills more prevalent, the industrial world more powerful, the WMC looked to the countryside as a place that had not changed, where simple people wanted simple things for themselves and their families. The reality was something much more complex; Brooks Blevins has described the Arkansas Ozarks of the 1920s – an explanation that could describe much of rural America at that time – as “a region in transition, a territory where the new mingled with the old, a place and time in which tradition and modernity overlapped and entwined inextricably.”<sup>64</sup> When World War II

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<sup>63</sup> “Twenty Seventh Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 119.

<sup>64</sup> Brooks Blevins, *Ghost of the Ozarks: Murder and Memory in the Upland South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), xviii.

radically changed the economic landscape of the country and the nation entered a new era of prosperity, the problems of 1920 did not seem to have the same weight. The WMC could turn away from rural work as quickly as they had embraced it.

## Chapter Four

“Let us discard the figure of the melting pot:” Immigrants, the KKK, and the

### WMC’s Alternative Vision of America

In the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan surged in the United States. Chapters sprung up across the country, attracting middle class white men and women deeply anxious about changing class and power structures. Members channeled this anxiety into a fervent antagonism toward immigrants of all origins, but particularly those who were Catholic or Jewish. Their message attracted ministers and members of all the prominent evangelical denominations, including the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Though precise membership numbers in the Women of the Ku Klux Klan is difficult to track, scores of white Protestant women joined their local auxiliaries.<sup>1</sup> William Alexander, a former Methodist minister and founder of the WMC-supported Commission on Interracial Cooperation, confessed privately that “the large number of [Methodist and Baptist] ministers who are in the Ku Klux Klan...rends me hopeless as far as the masses of ministers are concerned.”<sup>2</sup> In 1923, the National Catholic Bureau of Information found that of sixty-nine pro-Klan sermons, twenty-one had been preached by Methodists.<sup>3</sup> Beginning in 1915 and reaching a peak in the mid-1920s, the second iteration of the Ku Klux Klan preached a gospel of nativism and exclusion, one that many religious leaders supported.

The Woman’s Missionary Council rejected the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the KKK and middle-class South. The women criticized the mob violence instigated by the Klan and worked toward legislation that countered KKK beliefs. Class anxiety led American-born white

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen M Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley, Calif.; London: University of California Press, 2009), 7, 126.

<sup>2</sup> MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Eric S. Jacobson, “Silent Observer or Silent Partner: Methodism and the Texas Ku Klux Klan, 1921-1925,” *Methodist History* 31, no. 2 (January 1993): 106.

Americans to scapegoat immigrants as the source of their problems, resulting in a new rise of the Ku Klux Klan and nativist agitation. This class-driven nativism was articulated in an intense, racialized anti-Catholicism and anti-Judaism. But the women sidestepped these arguments. From the beginning of the century, the WMC had actively worked with newly arrived immigrants in the South, combining efforts to convert immigrants to Protestantism with practical services, such as teaching English and helping to alleviate poverty and poor living conditions. Unlike many of their male contemporaries, who saw immigration as a crisis and a threat to a decidedly American way of life, the WMC viewed immigrants as a great mission field. The WMC increasingly rejected Klan nativism in favor of pluralism, breaking rank with their race, class, and their own denomination. They matched their condemnation of the Klan with action, working to both improve the lives of immigrants and welcome them into American society. Perhaps most jarringly, they broke with many of their race and class in the South to actively oppose the Immigration Act of 1924, which would severely limit the number and origin of immigrants entering the United States. Where other southerners viewed immigrants as a dangerous threat to the “true” American way of life, Methodist women saw future citizens and potential members of their congregations. Rodney Roundy, associate secretary of the Home Missions Council, was blunt about the KKK: “Ku Klux organizations and their satellites can flourish only in darkness...all Christians should use their voices and utmost influence in suppressing this evil, and in preventing even its inception in American communities.”<sup>4</sup>

This chapter outlines how the WMC came to reject the prevailing attitudes and beliefs of the KKK and mainstream southern middle class thought concerning immigrants and Catholics

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<sup>4</sup> Rodney W. Roundy, “Growth of the Ku Klux Klan,” *The Missionary Voice*, November 1921, 339, General Agencies’ & Organizations’ Newsletters/Periodicals: General Board of Global Ministries, General Commission on Archives and History, The United Methodist Church.



and instead embrace a more pluralistic vision of American society. Methodist women began work with immigrants at the turn of the century motivated by the same fear felt by white, middle-class reformers. But that original impulse – to convert the heathen before he could harm their communities – gave way to a missionary impulse suffused with the social gospel. The women came to believe that immigrants could only be converted if their physical needs were met and their humanity and native culture respected. The Great War showed the women what evils could result from division and fear of others and the necessity of Christianity to overcome these divisions. Methodist women believed all people were redeemable, and this redemption required them to work in their mission field at a personal level. By the time the KKK resurged in the 1920s, the WMC had spent years working directly with immigrants on the ground. They were not easily swayed by the Klan’s fearmongering. Instead, the social gospel, their close work with immigrants on the ground, and the Great War showed them the value of embracing immigrants as potential converts and potential American citizens.

Immigrant work in the WMC was the result of the women’s missionary impulse. This began at the turn of the century as an urgent need to bring them the gospel. Immigrants represented a different kind of a spiritual battle. In their work with native born laborers, rural people, and African Americans, the WMC women talked a great deal about bolstering religious instruction, increasing church attendance, and helping wayward souls return to the fold. But in most cases, these groups were broadly considered “churched” in some capacity, educated at least in a rudimentary way in the Protestant Christian faith. Immigrants offered the chance to evangelize, in the women’s eyes, truly lost souls and convert them for Methodism or Protestantism at the least. The work of the foreign mission field was brought home.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 66–67.

In the early years of their work, the women were content to offer Bible classes and run settlement houses, their work tinged with the fear of immigration and racism that plagued much of the social gospel movement. Over time however, the WMC developed a new understanding of the social gospel, one in which relief from physical want was just as important as spiritual salvation. Just as with much of their work with industrial workers, rural people, and African Americans, the women were concerned about immigrant children's access to education, the state of homes and neighborhoods, healthcare and cleanliness, and working conditions, hours, and wages. However, nothing had more of a profound impact on the way the WMC viewed the world than World War I. Their involvement in the war had taught them the necessity of "reconciliation between races and nations" to prevent more war, as one WMC author wrote in 1923.<sup>6</sup> Their commitment to converting immigrants was subsumed into a larger effort to assimilate them into the American way of life. Methodist women began the century fearful of the moral havoc immigrants could play on American life. But this fear quickly gave way to a belief that immigrants could add something meaningful to the United States. Though they always hoped immigrants would convert to Protestantism, they did not hold conversion as a payment for their help or services. Instead, they helped immigrants assimilate – regardless of conversion - while preserving their native cultures and languages. Their view of immigrants' place in American life was starkly different than that of the KKK, leading to their ready opposition of KKK-supported immigration legislation in the 1920s.

This analysis offers an important corrective to historians' arguments that the WMC worked to maintain a mythical uniform American society. Historian of the WMC John McDowell argues, "The kingdom the women saw beginning here was decidedly homogenous.

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<sup>6</sup> "Faith and International Ideals and Personal Work for a Warless World" (December 1923), 4, Adult Year Book 1922-1923, Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

They believed strongly in the virtue of the American melting pot, but the pot they envisioned had a distinctly Protestant flavor.”<sup>7</sup> However, a close reading of the writings of WMC leaders and workers reveals a much more nuanced approach to immigrants, one that rejected the idea of a melting pot. The WMC certainly never gave up on their attempts to convert Catholic immigrants to Protestantism, but their rhetoric regarding Catholicism did not contain the hysterical fears or penchant for violence of other Christian leaders’. Home workers and deaconesses still attempted to teach immigrants English and the “American” way of life, but they did so while also celebrating foreigners’ native cultures. The services they provided – classes, clubs, clinics, food and clothing relief – were never contingent on conversion. And unlike with black southerners, who they hoped to see safely ensconced in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, white women in the South tried to welcome immigrants into their church homes, often over the protests of MECS members. These are important distinctions, as they reveal an attitude toward immigrants quite different than that of other southerners of their race and class. Methodist women did not envision an entirely “homogenous” “melting pot,” but one that maintained distinctions of culture and background. “Let us, once for all, discard the figure of the melting pot into which all nationalities are to be cast,” wrote WMC author Mary Clark Barnes in 1919, “reduced to molten images and turned out in brazen likenesses to each other, all stamped with our own brand of Americanism.”<sup>8</sup>

Prior to World War I, the WMC’s approach to immigrant work reflected the fear and suspicion many native-born Americans felt toward the swell of immigration. The women read reports of the swelling immigrant numbers in the North with great trepidation, convinced that it

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<sup>7</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 72.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Clark Barnes, “The Gulf Coast” (July 1919), 4, Adult Year Book 1918-1919, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

was only a matter of time before these numbers moved southward. The time southerners, including the WMC, spent lamenting the threats immigrants posed belies the actual number of immigrants in the South at this time. At the beginning of the twentieth century, approximately two percent of the population of the South was foreign-born, compared to one-fourth in the northeast. Besides a few select locations, immigrants had little impact on southern way of life.<sup>9</sup>

At the turn of the century, the women's language regarding immigrants sounded similar to other reformers. They were concerned about the moral impact immigrants might have on their cities and the country. During this time period, the WMC was heavily influenced by the teachings of Josiah Strong, a leader of the social gospel movement who espoused strong nationalist and nativist views and portrayed the Americanization of immigrants as vital to the safety of the country. Historian Elna C. Green writes, "The social gospel in the United States was tinged with the nativist and racist ideas of the era, particularly in the writings of Josiah Strong, who perceived Anglo-Saxons to be the chosen people and America as the location of the coming kingdom of God on Earth."<sup>10</sup> Lily Hammond, a prominent leader of the WMC, recommended books by Josiah Strong in her first published reading course for the Leaflets and Education committee in 1895. During an annual meeting in the late nineteenth century, one Woman's Home Mission Society leader reminded the members of Strong's admonition that "the perpetuity of our republican form of government and Christian institutions depends upon the Church molding the now alien population of our cities into harmony with the spirit of our government."<sup>11</sup> Even as late as 1915, the Little Rock Conference of the WMC in Arkansas invited Josiah Strong to address members at their annual meeting. The conference's historian, Cora Williams, noted

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<sup>9</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 60–61.

<sup>10</sup> Lily Hardy Hammond and Elna C Green, *In Black and White: An Interpretation of the South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), xvi, <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=3038913>.

<sup>11</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 69, 72.

that they had already read his books *The Twentieth Century City*, *Our Country*, *The Challenge of the City*, and others. His address to the women “made us glad we were women of the twentieth century and of America, yet opened up to us the vast responsibilities that come with these opportunities.”<sup>12</sup> In the early twentieth century, the women’s work reflected Strong’s central teachings. Immigrants needed to be converted and Americanized for the sake of the country, and they, as Christian white women, were particularly equipped to do this work. By converting the foreigner, the women could save souls and their country.

Even during this time, however, the WMC never called for limits to immigration, instead pressing forward with their city work in order to respond to the needs of the immigrants already in the cities and to prepare for those who would assuredly come. Their consistent belief that all people could be converted through direct missionary contact was incompatible with immigration restriction. To achieve their ends, Methodist women sent missionaries to work full-time in major southern cities. These missions allowed them to reach two areas of interest: immigrants and the urban and industrial poor. In 1899, there were seventeen workers established in ten cities. These workers were eventually directed to live in the communities they served, and this gave way to the establishment of settlement houses, the first in Nashville in 1901 and houses in Atlanta, Dallas, and St. Louis the following year. Over the next four decades, the women would create forty-five settlement houses throughout the South. In the face of criticism from within the denomination over the secular nature of a “settlement” house, the Home Missions Board voted to change the name to “Wesley House” in 1906. The Wesley Houses could be part church, part school, part hospital, and part charity. The Wesley Houses provided “clinics, day nurseries, domestic science and manual training classes, boys’ and girls’ scout organizations, clubs for the

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<sup>12</sup> Cora Gannaway Williams, *Builders of a Kingdom: A History of the Little Rock Conference Woman’s Missionary Society of Arkansas, 1873-1923* (Hot Springs National Park, AR, 1923), 215.

instruction of mothers, Sunday schools, and gospel meetings.”<sup>13</sup> The deaconesses and home workers were savvy in what services they provided, using those as a means to reach households. A deaconess in Dallas reported in 1915 that “only through the kindergarten and sewing school are we able to touch Jewish life.” That same deaconess organized a night school specifically for Mexicans, who were eager to learn English, men and women alike.<sup>14</sup>

In certain situations, the Methodist missions could provide an unprecedented level of support to immigrants. In the port city of Galveston, Texas, the Woman’s Board of Home Missions partnered with the Board of Missions in 1907 to create a “home for immigrants,” a kind of processing center for new arrivals. At the time, there was not a government-run version of this, and the only private agency, run by New Yorkers, only served Jewish immigrants. Missionaries met thousands of people as they entered the city and directed them to centers where they could find work. In the process, the missionaries taught them “the better things of our American civilization.” Many of these immigrants would move on to other cities, but they did not forget the Galveston mission; “from all parts of the United States letters of gratitude returned to the missionary in charge.” In 1912, the government created an immigrant home on Pelican Island, ending the need for this level of private intervention. But the Woman’s Missionary Council continued the work. By 1929, the Galveston port mission offered a vast number of services far removed from the typical WMC work, including helping people find work, helping secure passports and naturalization papers, reading and translating letters and documents, visiting the police station and jail, and performing marriages and burials. The port missionary reported that he worked daily with the United States Immigration Service, as well as foreign consulates,

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<sup>13</sup> Estelle Haskin, “Foreign Missions in the Homeland” (May 1926), 9, Adult Year Book 1926-1927, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

<sup>14</sup> Haskin, *Women and Missions in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, 210–11.

local officials, representatives of the railways and steamship companies, and several other missionary societies. Work with immigrants offered the WMC a unique opportunity to expand their work well beyond the typical.<sup>15</sup>

The deaconesses, outsiders sent to these communities, lived amongst the immigrants they served. The head resident of a Wesley House serving Mexican immigrants in San Antonio, Texas said, “To know the Mexican people one must live with them and living with them one learns to love them and to understand something of their problems.”<sup>16</sup> The work covered a diverse array of industries that often brought together several different nationalities in one location. A house in Biloxi served a district with five large oyster canning factories, which brought workers from Baltimore and other northern cities for the oyster season. A mission in the coal fields of Hartshorne, Oklahoma served six thousand “foreigners” comprised of more than twenty nationalities. The deaconesses and workers were expected to move between these groups with aplomb. One such worker in the lead belt of Missouri explained how workers were segregated into small villages, writing “Each day a new village was entered and a new nationality visited. One day it was an Italian village, the next a Polish, another an Austrian or a Russian. When the itinerancy had been made and the ten villages visited, I felt as though I had been peering into a kaleidoscope which showed about thirteen different nationalities in highly colored costumes.” Methodist workers were encouraged to learn the languages and customs of these different groups. Three workers at the Wesley House in Tampa, Florida spent one to four hours a day studying Spanish. Though the language was difficult, the deaconess reported that it was worth it, writing “the people have seemed so pleased that I have tried to speak to them in their own

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<sup>15</sup> Haskin, 225–26; “Nineteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 167–68.

<sup>16</sup> “The Council Bulletin,” March 1930, 40, Programs and Pamphlets Folder 2 1929-1941, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

tongue.” In scenarios like the Missouri lead belt, where immigrant workers lived in villages spread out across several miles, the women learned about the families through itineracy. But in more consolidated areas, such as those surrounding city factories, the women often lived in the foreigners’ communities.<sup>17</sup>

In the early years of this work, the WMC employed rhetoric that depicted immigrants as a threat to American life. In 1910, Belle Bennett, one of the most important leaders of women’s missions at this time, gave an address to the General Missionary Conference that attempted to convince the men that the women’s mission board should continue and expand beyond its original directive to build parsonages. She explained that the women had been motivated by the problems of “irreligious” immigrants, including the “idol-worshipping” Chinese and Japanese with their “degrading vices.” “The factory population, with its difficult problems,” Bennett explained, “was enormously on the increase; and the mining camps, with their mixed and migratory multitudes of every nationality and no religion, were a growing evil.” Importantly, her point to this all male audience was that women had seen the problems among immigrants in the cities, and the women should be allowed to help. Bennett wanted to evangelize the immigrants, certainly, but she also wanted to root that evangelism in a concerted effort to improve the lives and prospects of immigrants and their children.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, her descriptions of immigrants and their potential impact on the country are indicative of how the WMC spoke of foreigners at this time.

The women spoke in a similar manner when discussing Catholic immigrants. Around the turn of the century, the women spoke with open condemnation of Catholicism, decrying its

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<sup>17</sup> Haskin, *Women and Missions in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, 211–13; “Second Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 391–92; McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 70.

<sup>18</sup> Ellen Blue, *St. Mark’s and the Social Gospel: Methodist Women and Civil Rights in New Orleans, 1895-1965*, 1st ed (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011), 40–42, 46.



“ignorance, superstition, and dependence” and penchant for immorality brought about by easy access to priestly absolution and penance.<sup>19</sup> Though the WMC spoke with condescension toward Catholics and other immigrants, they did not suggest the extreme and vitriolic solutions to these issues that other reformers championed. Writing about Methodist women’s work in New Orleans, historian Ellen Blue argues, “To the exact extent that the women (like society in general) saw the underlying problem as the very existence of the “Other” in their midst, their failure to address the problem at the root— by exterminating minority groups, as the *New Orleans States* editor proposed, or by urging the closing of our borders— might appear a genuinely progressive, if not Christian, response.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, in a comparison between MEC and MECS workers in New Orleans, Ellen Blue found that it is “the northern women whose rhetoric is vitriolic. Using derogatory language...was a part of the northern women’s tactics for gaining support for the New Orleans ministry...MECS women did not use such language about the Italians whom they would serve.”<sup>21</sup>

World War I was an important turning point for how the WMC viewed and spoke of immigrants. According to historian John McDowell, “The First World War had shown [Methodist women] the possible consequences of intolerance and, along with their foreign mission work, had given them more knowledge about the world. They could acknowledge the value of other systems.”<sup>22</sup> The war forced Christians to try to reconcile their faith with the atrocities performed by nations, and many came up short. In the WMC’s view, the war had been caused by ethno-nationalism, an obsession with national self-interest that left people blind to the consequences of their actions. People had failed to realize how bound up the interests and lives

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<sup>19</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 68.

<sup>20</sup> Blue, *St. Mark’s and the Social Gospel*, 44–45.

<sup>21</sup> Blue, 46.

<sup>22</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 68.

of nations were, realizing it only when “the horror and loss of this twentieth-century war shocked us into world consciousness.” Mrs. R. W. MacDonell argued in 1918, “The explosion that mangled Europe has wakened us to the fact that nations can no more live to themselves than can individuals, and that henceforth the world must live one life.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, Methodist women must prevent more war, argued a WMC author in 1923, by battling “hatred between races and nations” and man’s desire for empire “maintained by the bare brute force of bayonets and battleships.”<sup>24</sup>

Only Christianity could prevent the advent of war. There were only two paths forward, the WMC contended in 1923, “A warless world or a world destroyed by war.” Methodist women could only achieve the former by their faith. This faith, “stirred by the spirit of the Living God,” beheld a new vision of the world, “the vision of the kingdom of God, resulting in a warless world, a heaven on earth.” This war upon war would require many different types of leaders – scientists, economists, politicians, educator. But without the church, their efforts would ultimately fail. The WMC was clear on this point:

One more thing is needful. It is the spirit of international and interracial good will, of justice to all, of reconciliation between races and nations...We of the white race especially must learn to look at our history as the black man looks at it, as the Asiatic looks at it, as God looks at it. We must have a sense of guilt for national sin and a spirit of repentance, deep and genuine. We need, as nations, the regenerating work of the spirit of the Living God in the innermost parts of our national hearts and wills. The creation of this spirit is the peculiar work of the Church and the special contribution which it has to make in the war upon war. The reconciling and redemptive program of the Church must deal with nations and races no less than with individuals. Friendship and good will between nations must replace estrangement and enmity. This is the kingdom of God to be established on earth as it is in heaven. It is to include men of every class and nation, of every race and tribe. All are to be reconciled. This is the supreme task of the Church.

The only possible way to avoid war, in the women’s eyes, was to overcome divisions through the teachings of Christ. Without it, the best efforts of sociologists and economists to root out poverty

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<sup>23</sup> Mrs. R. W. Macdonell, “The War and the Immigrant” (March 1918), 1, Adult Year Book 1918-1919, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

<sup>24</sup> “Faith and International Ideals and Personal Work for a Warless World,” 5.

or statemen and jurists to create more just systems would fail in the face of racial and national enmity.<sup>25</sup>

The war had a direct impact on how Methodist women viewed immigrants and the rhetoric they used about them. They were preaching a gospel of acceptance and reconciliation for races and nations, and they realized that they too had to live out this gospel. They also saw firsthand the contributions immigrants and naturalized citizens made to the war effort, both on the home front and abroad. Where Belle Bennett spoke of the “growing evil” of mixed nationalities in factory towns in 1910, Mary DeBardeleben was more understanding in her 1920 tract, “The New American in Labor Reconstruction.” “The immigrant came to our shores seeking amelioration of his condition,” she writes, “He came to find work, to get a living wage, a living chance. Being a stranger, he naturally gravitated to the community where people spoke his own tongue.” He continued to live in the foreign tenement, she argued, because he did not know there was anything better or perhaps could not afford anything better. In this pamphlet distributed for auxiliary members to study, DeBardeleben was pointed in how she described immigrants’ wartime contributions and how the country had failed these people, writing:

The war came on, and he was called upon to contribute his share to world freedom. He bought his liberty bonds, his victory bonds, he gave his sons, he gave himself in support of the great underlying principles of our republic; and now he is insisting that we make good our boast of championship of the oppressed; that our ideals of self-determination, of democracy, of brotherhood be not mere empty words, but that they be realized in the industrial life of the people, in the life of the new American.

DeBardeleben argued that immigrants had given just as much to the war effort as native-born Americans, and they deserved the same treatment and rights as others.<sup>26</sup> Another WMC writer in 1919 was even more pointed in giving credit to immigrants, writing “The industries vital to the

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<sup>25</sup> “Faith and International Ideals and Personal Work for a Warless World,” 3–4.

<sup>26</sup> Mary DeBardeleben, “The New American in Labor Reconstruction” (March 1920), 4, Adult Year Book 1920-1921, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

prosecution of the war depended upon this alien population. One-fourth of the American Expeditionary Force were foreigners. They can no longer be termed immigrants, but must be recognized as allies, and it is for the Church of God to work to ally them not only to our national government, but to the kingdom of God.”<sup>27</sup>

Because of the new attention they gave to immigrants’ contributions to the war effort, the WMC began to fully appreciate how dire immigrants’ living and working conditions were. The women lamented the conditions of the tenements and factory towns, and they tied industrial conditions, wages, and hours to this low quality of life. In 1919, Mrs. W. M. Macdonell wrote, “The segregation of foreign-born people in sections of the cities remote from contact with our highest ideals, separated by lingual differences, and often dominated by a ward boss, presents a great difficulty to a new country like ours.”<sup>28</sup> Unlike the KKK, who blamed foreigners, particularly Italian and Irish Catholics, for political corruption, the Methodist women correctly saw how working-class immigrants were equally affected. Mary DeBardeleben made a similar argument in 1920, writing “[Immigrants] are easily made the tool of any demagogue or political ‘boss’ or gang who may take advantage of their simplicity and of their needs to exploit them and the country.”<sup>29</sup> Macdonell continued this line of thinking that immigrants were the victims of their environment, writing, “Industrial centers, where people live in unsanitary houses with inadequate water supply, and in neglected streets, where insufficient wage and overwork lower the standards of life, mark not only failure of municipal control, but the failure of the application of democratic principles to the health, life, and morals of its people.” In a 1920 tract, the author quoted a report of the *Ladies Home Journal*: “The paved streets stopped short of the foreign

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<sup>27</sup> Barnes, “The Gulf Coast,” 10.

<sup>28</sup> Mrs. R. W. Macdonell, “The Wesley House as a Strategic Center for the City” (April 1919), 3, Adult Year Book 1918-1919, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

<sup>29</sup> DeBardeleben, “The New American in Labor Reconstruction,” 3.

district; so did the drainage; so did the city water system; so did the fire hose and the fire plugs.”<sup>30</sup> The WMC responded to these problems through their Wesley Houses; the settlements were their most practical solution to provide financial and emotional relief for workers. Though their work may seem small in the large scope of the problems immigrants faced, the clinics, milk stations for babies, libraries, and gymnasiums they ran, among many other things, alleviated the harsh realities of immigrants’ lives.

The war cast a new light on the WMC’s understanding of the social gospel, leading them to a more pluralistic vision of immigration work. As the women grew to view immigrants as contributing members of their communities, their version of the social gospel lost much of the racist and nativist tinge espoused by its originators. They more readily embraced a gospel that emphasized the “salvation of society as a whole in the here and now” over personal salvation.<sup>31</sup> The social gospel taught Methodist women that they had an obligation to attend to the spiritual and physical care of others. Through this work, they could achieve the Kingdom of God on earth. In the introduction to a 1917 tract on “The Kingdom Coming in the Cotton Mills,” the WMC author wrote,

We have come to realize that the kingdom is a world-wide society in which universal obedience to divine law will bring universal blessing, mental, physical, and spiritual. We believe this world, redeemed and filled with love to God and man, was the kingdom our Lord saw - an ideal world, saved with spiritual redemption and physical perfection; a world where men are brought into right relations with each other and to God, where men have justice, equal opportunity, and the great spiritual and ethical purposes of divine law are fulfilled. It is for such an ideal world as this that his followers are to work.<sup>32</sup>

The women could not achieve “spiritual redemption and physical perfection” by restricting who could immigrate to the United States or who they would assist. Nor could they achieve these

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<sup>30</sup> DeBardeleben, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Blue, *St. Mark’s and the Social Gospel*, 12.

<sup>32</sup> “The Kingdom Coming in the Cotton Mills,” 1.

ends if they dismissed some immigrants or religions as irredeemable, as the KKK did with Jews. Not only did the WMC believe Jews could be converted, but they also believed they could participate fully in American citizenship.<sup>33</sup> The social gospel required Methodist women to minister to immigrants, so logically they could not reject them.

This adds credence to historian Ellen Blue's argument that "the work of the Social Gospel remained in full swing in the 1920s." Though many historians have identified World War I as the ending of the social gospel movement, as its futility led to worldwide disillusionment, Blue argues that this ending date was assigned due to a kind of academic laziness. The most prominent male thinkers and writers died around this date, and historians have often failed to differentiate between the academic philosophizing surrounding the social gospel movement and actual practitioners of the social gospel. Like the Methodist deaconesses and laywomen Blue writes about in *St. Mark's and the Social Gospel*, WMC work generally surged throughout the 1920s, only tapering in the 1930s after federal legislation slowed the rate of immigration to the United States.<sup>34</sup>

This changed rhetoric is even more remarkable given the larger conversations regarding immigrants that developed in the 1910s and 1920s. Indeed, the WMC's work with immigrants can only be understood when placed in the larger context of the conflicts seething beneath the surface in American society during these decades. Many of the European immigrants the WMC served were embroiled in a national debate over class and race. Native-born, middle-class Americans grew increasingly fearful that their status and power were slipping away. This class anxiety was articulated in stringent, racialized anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant views. For

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<sup>33</sup> Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*, First edition (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 28.

<sup>34</sup> Blue, *St. Mark's and the Social Gospel*, 12–13.

native-born, white men in the South, their ethnic and religious identity gave them common cause across class division, lining low-class workers up with the ruling elite against blacks and Catholics.<sup>35</sup> Historian Matthew Frye Jacobson identifies this as a specific historical understanding of race in which immigrants were part of a “system of ‘difference’ by which one might be both white *and* racially distinct from other whites.”<sup>36</sup>

The second Ku Klux Klan was at the forefront of the fight to preserve “true” Americanism. The new iteration of the Klan, founded in 1915 by a former Methodist clergyman, William Simmons, “built a politics of resentment, reflecting but also fomenting antipathy toward those who it defined as threatening Americanism.”<sup>37</sup> Anti-Catholicism and the nativism that fueled it had reached a peak in the 1920s. The massive increase in European immigration in the preceding decades had prompted urgent questions about who deserved to be American and to wield status and power. The Klan responded by accusing immigrants and non-Protestants of stealing “true” Americans’ jobs and attempting to take over the government. Ignoring their own non-indigenous ancestry, the Klan focused on the large-scale immigration of Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Jews that had begun in the 1880s. Historian Linda Gordon argues that the Klan’s “racial and religious bigotry may have been provoked by economic anxiety but also arose from independent, long-standing American traditions.” The Klan gave a large platform to Americans’ preexisting nativist and racist sentiments, and its members’ respectability gave them legitimacy. The “established codes of whiteness as inclusive of all Europeans” argues Jacobson,

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<sup>35</sup> MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 73.

<sup>36</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>37</sup> Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 3.

“gave way to “new, racialist revisions” when thousands of new immigrants disembarked on the United States’ shores.<sup>38</sup>

The Klan’s rabid attacks on Jews, Orthodox Christians, and Catholics was not merely religious prejudice but the conflation of religious prejudice with racism and a patriotic effort to protect the country. “For nativists,” writes Gordon, “Protestantism was patriotism, and non-Protestants were disloyal...in Klanspeak, ‘white’ sometimes meant Protestant.” There was also a deeply rooted class component. In their caricatures and accusations of Jews and Catholics, the Klan conveniently left out any mention of working-class members. In the Klan’s eyes, Jews were the very definition of the elite class, either “snobbish, over-educated, effete professionals or money-grubbing merchants out to fleece innocent consumers.” Catholics were to blame for political corruption. In both visions of non-Protestants, there was no acknowledgement of urban poor and working-class Jews or Catholics or the masses of working-class people who were just as impacted by political corruption as Klan members. This focus on Catholics and Jews as the root of all evil in the country allowed the Klan to be anti-elite, anti-corruption, and pro-jobs for “true” Americans without actually criticizing those who wielded economic power.<sup>39</sup>

In particular, the Klan and nativists took aim at Roman Catholics, writes historian Arthur Remillard, as they were convinced that “Catholics were an organized band of religious fanatics who planned to overthrow the nation’s Protestant authorities.” The conflict between Catholics and nativists sat at the center of a debate on who could be a “true” American, and the issue was central to many election campaigns in the 1910s. According to historian Kenneth Barnes, Catholics “became the foil as white Protestants defined the authentic American identity.” Fearful of the “papist” allegiances and their views on sex and alcohol, white Protestants wove their

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<sup>38</sup> Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 72; Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 3–5.



suspicion of Catholics into their nativism. Many Progressive Era church leaders embraced this rhetoric, stressing the division between groups to draw attention to what they called the “immigrant problem.” Using loaded terminology such as “self-preservation,” these reformers drummed up support for mission funding by playing on “us-them” fears.<sup>40</sup>

Public expressions of anti-Catholicism declined after American entry into the First World War, but “the Klan’s rapid growth...in the early 1920s brought an institutional mechanism for prejudice against Roman Catholics.”<sup>41</sup> The 1920s Klan was not the same organization as the Reconstruction Klan or the Klan of the 1950s and later. According to Barnes, the Klan of the 1920s “was a highly organized national movement with chapters in all forty-eight states. Its membership was largely middle class, and local leaders were often the most prominent men in the community.” A “mainstream movement,” the Klan carried a great deal of social and political weight, acting against many groups the Klan perceived as threats to their way of life.<sup>42</sup>

The Klan articulated ideas of white supremacy by allowing its members to define themselves by what they were not. Gordon argues that because the second Klan was biggest in areas with very small black populations, the Klan relied on a definition of white supremacy that was much more narrowly defined. She writes, “Supremacy belonged only to native-born, Protestant whites, sometimes identified by the term ‘Nordic,’ sometimes ‘Anglo-Saxon,’ sometimes ‘right’ or ‘true’ or ‘100%’ Americans. No Catholics, Jews, Orthodox Christians, or Muslims, and no people of color, could be truly American.”<sup>43</sup> Historian Kathleen M. Blee argues

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<sup>40</sup> Arthur Remillard, *Southern Civil Religions: Imagining the Good Society in the Post-Reconstruction Era*, The New Southern Studies (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 137, 144; Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 28; Kenneth C. Barnes, *Anti-Catholicism in Arkansas: How Politicians, the Press, the Klan, and Religious Leaders Imagined an Enemy, 1910-1960* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2016), 4.

<sup>41</sup> Barnes, *Anti-Catholicism in Arkansas*, 92.

<sup>42</sup> Barnes, 94.

<sup>43</sup> Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 41.

that the Klan built these narratives by relying heavily on the use of sexuality as a political symbol, trotting out stories of exotic sexual debauchery among Catholic clergy, Jewish businessmen, and black migrants in order to entertain, titillate, and scandalize potential members. These stories gave white Protestants “an easy way to affirm their allegiance to home and family life by simply distancing themselves from such extremes of profane sexuality.” White Protestants could be mobilized and unified by reminding them of what they were not – they were not black, they were not Catholic, and they were not Jewish. By unifying them over what they were *not*, the Klan avoided, at least for a time, the real issues facing and dividing white Protestants in the 1920s.<sup>44</sup>

Though the Klan was opposed to many groups – blacks, Jews, bootleggers, labor organizers, criminals – Anti-Catholicism was one of the Klan’s pet projects, bolstered by those who had already spoken out against Rome in the 1910s who flocked to the Klan. The Klan lecture circuit was full of fake former priests and nuns who proselytized “One Hundred Percent Americanism” and accused Catholics as being disloyal to the United States.<sup>45</sup> Klansmen saw the authority of the pope over the laity as akin to monarchy. They accused the papal authority of directing American Catholics’ votes, creating a powerful voting bloc that could swing elections.<sup>46</sup> Lecturers’ most persuasive argument for their audiences concerned the sexual practices of priests and nuns. One of the most successful Klan speakers billed herself as an “escaped nun.” Helen Jackson regaled audiences across the country with tales of sexual horrors – abortions and infanticides forced on nuns by the priests who had fathered their children.<sup>47</sup> The

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<sup>44</sup> Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 97.

<sup>45</sup> Barnes, *Anti-Catholicism in Arkansas*, 92.

<sup>46</sup> MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 95–96.

<sup>47</sup> Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 87, 89.

Klan turned this rhetoric into political action, advocating for restrictive immigration laws, campaigning against Catholic entrance into politics, and agitating against parochial schools.<sup>48</sup>

The Klan's opposition to European immigration was centered almost entirely on Catholic immigrants. The Klan did not allow the foreign born to become members. But in 1923, Klansmen from across the nation incorporated a new Klan auxiliary, the American Crusaders, headquartered in Little Rock, Arkansas. The Crusaders specifically invited Protestant immigrants who were foreign born to membership, articulating that their hatred of immigrants was reserved for those who were not Protestant.<sup>49</sup>

As an anti-immigration tactic, these methods were particularly effective because few white southerners encountered Jews or Catholics in their daily lives. Fantastic tales of debauched nuns, predatory priests, and corrupt Jewish bankers stirred the imaginations of discontent southerners who had no other frame of reference. But this fearmongering had little impact on Methodist women who knew immigrants well. Methodist women saw firsthand how immigrants worked long, difficult hours in factories. They taught their children in Sunday Schools, Boy Scout troops, and sewing classes, and they worked late in the evening to teach adults English. They visited immigrants' homes, held celebrations with their families, and sampled their cooking. Scores of Methodist women had a very different view of immigrants than that proclaimed by the KKK.

The WMC competed with KKK proselytization by spreading their own views of immigrants to members. Even those WMC members who had no direct contact with immigrants could learn of this work in auxiliary study classes and at conference meetings. In addition to detailing the work of deaconesses and home workers in immigrant communities, the WMC also

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<sup>48</sup> Barnes, *Anti-Catholicism in Arkansas*, 107.

<sup>49</sup> Barnes, 109–10.

educated their thousands of members about the realities of immigrants' jobs, both the grim conditions of industrial work and the necessity of their work to American industry. Their protests about industrial conditions for immigrants were the same they voiced for American-born workers, decrying long hours, low wages, and dangerous work environments. But they also made clear these issues especially affected immigrants. In a 1920 tract titled "The New American in Labor Reconstruction," Mary DeBardeleben was blunt, writing, "We are coming to realize that there can be no talk of the Americanization of the immigrant until as a nation we see to the humanization of his living and working conditions, until we bring about a reconstruction of labor." She corrected those who might think the war had improved things for workers. She conceded the war had improved wages for workers in certain industries, "yet in many other lines not directly affected by the war wages rose little, if at all." She questioned government entities that claimed improvement in work hours: "'The eight-hour day is an established policy of the country,' said President Wilson's personal mediation commission; but it seems that much propaganda, legislation, and organized protest is still necessary to make it become the settled policy of all the great industries throughout the country."<sup>50</sup> The WMC also wrote of industries that had especially high numbers of immigrants working in them. For instance, the WMC published several tracts on Cuban immigrants in Florida, one author writing that "one cannot speak of Cuban immigration without building hard by that other life-sapping oppressor – the tobacco factory." The writer described how the confinement of the factories resulted in a slow poisoning from the tobacco fumes, as the windows were kept closed regardless of the weather to keep the factory at a certain level of humidity.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> DeBardeleben, "The New American in Labor Reconstruction," 5–6.

<sup>51</sup> Mrs. R. W. MacDonell, "Cubans in America: Our Neighbors" (August 1915), 3, *Adult Year Book 1915-1917*, Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries; Mrs. J. D. Lewis, "From Cuba to

By disseminating materials that defended immigrants to women throughout the South, the WMC battled the propaganda of the KKK in their own way. WMC language about immigrant labor was a sharp rebuke of the message circulated by the Klan and nativists. Immigrants stealing jobs from “true” Americans was a central talking point of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>52</sup> But WMC writers made no such claims and in fact celebrated the importance of immigrant work, particularly during the war. Methodist workers experienced firsthand the outcomes of the anti-immigrant rhetoric used by the KKK and reported it to their members. Estelle Haskin, in her 1925 history of Methodist women’s work, described how a deaconess serving the lead belt of Missouri reported that “strange men came into the lead belt and incited the American employees to rioting. The foreign men were stoned and driven from their work and their wives and children thrust from their homes. Finally, at the point of a gun, they were loaded into cars and shipped to St. Louis. Because of these dreadful events, incident to World War conditions, it became necessary to close the work.”<sup>53</sup> The WMC devoted reams of paper and ink to disseminate their version of immigrants’ lives and contributions to American life, countering the fear and misinformation spread by the KKK. In a time when few would speak positively about immigrants, let alone openly support them and their right to live and work in the United States, the WMC stands out as a strong ally of the foreign-born.

These competing views of immigrants came to a head in immigration legislation of the 1920s. The Klan churned out rhetoric about the extreme dangers immigrants brought to American shores, contributing to a larger discourse about “race suicide.” According to these adherents, race suicide would be caused when immigrants and the working class produced more

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Florida” (October 1916), 4, *Adult Year Book 1915-1917*, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

<sup>52</sup> Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> *Women and Missions in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, 213–14.

babies than the American-born, white middle-class.<sup>54</sup> This fear of immigrants’ “conquest by procreation” resulted in a eugenic dimension to immigration policy. Immigration by certain groups, the argument went, needed to be restricted to prevent an unsavory element being introduced into American citizenry and gene pool. Eugenicists resisted immigration from any country perceived as of lower “character,” assigning essential character, moral, and intellectual qualities to physical properties. Eugenicists carefully delineated between European countries; one adherent presented a three-tiered hierarchy of “Nordics,” “Alpines,” and “Mediterraneans.” As these separations conveniently elevated Protestants over Catholics, eugenicists were ideal allies for the Klan.<sup>55</sup> The Klan, for their part, focused on the large-scale immigration of Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Jews, arguing not only for an end to the immigration of “non-Nordics” but for deporting those already in the United States.<sup>56</sup>

The Klan and eugenicists placed people racialized as white into a hierarchy in the 1920s. Gordon argues that this “could be seen as an opposition reaction to this expansion of whiteness, by its efforts to limit ‘right’ citizenship to a narrower group.” In the 1880s, with the beginning of mass migration, many immigrants, including the Irish, Italian, and eastern European immigrants, were not considered white by earlier immigrants. But by the 1920s, “these newer immigrants had become white.” According to historian Matthew Frye Jacobson, the “contest over whiteness – its definition, its internal hierarchies, its proper boundaries, and its rightful claimants – has been critical to American culture throughout the nation’s history.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, the Klan and its allies in the anti-immigration movement pursued legislation that would counter these developments. They found success in the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which created a quota system based on 2

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<sup>54</sup> Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 2.

<sup>55</sup> Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 80–82.

<sup>56</sup> Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 27.

<sup>57</sup> Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 5.

percent of each group's population in the US. The population data for the quotas were based on the 1890 system, a purposeful decision designed to elevate some groups over others.

According to Gordon, the Act “ensconced into law the Klan’s hierarchy of desirable and undesirable ‘races.’”<sup>58</sup> The Act was rooted in the Report of the Eugenics Committee of the United States Committee on Selective Immigration, which argued that using the 1890 census “would change the character of immigration, and hence of our future population, by bringing about a preponderance of immigration of the stock which originally settled this country.” The report was explicit in stating immigrants from northern and western Europe were more intelligent and better suited for American citizenship.<sup>59</sup> The use of the 1890 census was temporary, however. The bill called for a special committee to develop permanent quotas that would go into effect in 1927. These quotas would be based on the national origins of the United States’ one hundred million citizens. As many Americans’ ancestors arrived long before census records asked for national origin, the committee was forced to guess millions of Americans’ origins based on the perceived ethnicity of their surnames. The national origins of African Americans, Indians, and those from elsewhere in the Americas or Asia were ignored. When the Act finally went into effect in 1929, the quotas for Catholic countries such as Italy, Poland, Germany, and Ireland were even further reduced from the original version, and the quota for Great Britain was further enlarged.<sup>60</sup> The results of the Act demonstrate how closely aligned the Klan’s anti-immigration/anti-Catholic positions were with eugenics, as majority-Catholic countries were targeted over others.<sup>61</sup> According to Jacobson, though the Act did face opposition by immigrants and natives alike, including some in Congress, no one – opponents or supporters –

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<sup>58</sup> Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 181, 195.

<sup>59</sup> Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 83.

<sup>60</sup> Barnes, *Anti-Catholicism in Arkansas*, 110–11.

<sup>61</sup> Barnes, 110.

denied the core principle that “*some* groups did indeed require their exclusion from the nation’s political life.” The question was not whether some groups should be excluded but which groups should be targeted for exclusion. The Johnson Act did not redefine race but articulated into law a “refined understanding of whiteness” that placed white races into a hierarchy.<sup>62</sup>

Nowhere was the WMC’s break with the KKK’s teaching clearer than in their opposition to the Johnson-Reed Act and the principles it represented. The women found the law needlessly cruel toward immigrants attempting to start a new life in the United States. James Skinner, the superintendent of the WMC Holding Institute in Laredo, TX, reported, “From time to time regulations are promulgated from Washington City, or new interpretations made, which render it more and more difficult to cross from Mexico for any purpose whatever...It is not only an expensive matter, but, seemingly, a serious lack of courtesy toward the alien who wishes to come among us for education, for pleasure, or for business.”<sup>63</sup> In particular, the women lamented how much the legislation affected their foreign mission work in Japan. Mary Searcy, a missionary in Kure, Japan, wrote, “The passage of the Immigration Bill was indeed a blow to our work, and though the feeling is not quite so intense now as at first, we can still feel the effects of it.”<sup>64</sup> The Act employed the central arguments of Josiah Strong, that those of Anglo-Saxon descent were more intelligent and exclusively worthy of American citizenship. By rejecting the Johnson-Reed Act, the WMC rejected a version of the social gospel that had so informed their earlier work.

In perhaps their clearest rejection of the Immigration Act of 1924 and the people and ideas that supported it, the WMC increasingly viewed immigrants as potential citizens with much to contribute to the American way of life. They spoke warmly of the immigrants they worked

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<sup>62</sup> Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 86–88.

<sup>63</sup> “Fifteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 241.

<sup>64</sup> “Fifteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 300.



with. A deaconess in St. Joseph, Missouri spoke glowingly of the “great, good-natured, intelligent Germans with their hunger and determination to learn English and be loyal Americans; timid, hard-working Polish and Mexican laborers toiling for a bare living in the packing house; able-bodied, clear-eyed Americans and Rumanians, all gather twice a week to learn English and to know how Americans should live.”<sup>65</sup> Hylda Head, a worker in the coal fields of Hemphill, West Virginia, reported, “The personal contact with the people, both young and old, reveal to us many lovable and admirable traits of character in those who come to us from other nations, as well as in our Americans.”<sup>66</sup> If they viewed European immigrants as racially different from themselves, they did not give voice to those views.

Perhaps most notably, the WMC broke with the nativism of the Klan and others in their approach to “Americanization.” Methodist women were certainly concerned with integrating immigrants into American life, but they also encouraged foreigners to celebrate their cultures and learn to live alongside others. In a piece of study literature for the auxiliaries, Estelle Haskin described the WMC’s approach to Americanization: “Christian Americanization is a process of getting into tune. America is an orchestra of more than fifty racial groups. Harmony will be achieved only when foreign and native born learn to play in tune.”<sup>67</sup> This was a far cry from the Klan’s views of immigrant diversity, described by Gordon: “Fear of heterogeneity underlay its extreme nationalism and isolationism; Klanspeople saw little to admire in any foreign culture. Many Americans shared (and still share) this anxiety; nativists abhorred the ‘Babel of voices’ that arose from the immigrant enclaves in big cities and industrial or mining towns. These people

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<sup>65</sup> “Nineteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 187.

<sup>66</sup> “Nineteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 184.

<sup>67</sup> Haskin, “Foreign Missions in the Homeland,” 8.

looked and cooked differently, socialized with their own kind, spoke in foreign tongues. Such a hodgepodge led to chaos in the Klannish mind. Order required uniformity.”

The WMC had no such desire for homogeneity. Deaconesses supported the sharing of native cultures in their parties and “nationality suppers.” “Only last week,” wrote a deaconess in Missouri, “we feasted on a delicious Mexican supper, prepared by the Mexican pupils in honor of a stalwart Armenian who had just passed his naturalization examinations and is now an American citizen. This week the Armenians played host, and such appetizing dishes they gave us!” At the St. Mark’s Community Center in New Orleans, which served over 30,000 foreigners in the French quarter, the deaconess planned a large annual festival, in which each nationality could be celebrated and shared. She set up committees representing each country and set them to work finding articles from people’s homes to display. Each booth displayed handwork, rugs, paintings, and curios from that country, and the booth was staffed by a young man or woman in the country’s native costume.<sup>68</sup>

Teaching English was of course a central component of the WMC’s Americanization efforts, but even these efforts ran counter to the views held by the Klan and nativists. The WMC encouraged immigrants to keep using their native languages, writing in 1919, “For cultural purposes and for the sake of the children the foreign people should be permitted to retain their native language and their children taught to respect that language, but English should be taught for uniformity.”<sup>69</sup> The WMC believed immigrants needed to learn English to survive. The book the WMC recommended using for beginners, “Early Stories and Songs for New Students in

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<sup>68</sup> “Nineteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 166, 187–88; “Twentieth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 316.

<sup>69</sup> Barnes, “The Gulf Coast,” 4.

English,” began with a lesson “built upon the words needed first in adapting to new conditions – ‘go,’ ‘show,’ ‘help,’ ‘name,’ country.’”

The lack of English classes was an “enormous problem,” so the WMC continually stressed that anyone could teach immigrants English, without special training. They listed English books and lessons that Methodist women could use, suggesting they gift them to men and women who did not have access to English classes. A better solution, though, would be to gather a group of women together in a home or to establish night classes for boys or men in industrial centers. Deaconesses undertook this work in several communities, but the WMC pointedly directed their members in 1915, “there are many communities where there cannot be trained workers in which this personal work must be done. If it must be done, then God means *you* to do it.”<sup>70</sup>

English was also a vital step in helping immigrants become contributing citizens. Unlike the Klan, who wished to deport immigrants to their homelands, the WMC viewed immigrants as future Americans. They suggested teaching English with books like *Civics for Americans in the Making* for “men, who must become voters and lawmakers” and *Civics for Coming Americans* which gave “in concise form and definite statements the information needed in preparation for naturalization.” A deaconess in Tampa, FL wrote of the Italian boys in her Boy Scout troop, “I believe these boys are going to make good American citizens.”<sup>71</sup> Compare the deaconess who wrote of Germans hungry to be “loyal Americans” with the Klan’s teachings that Catholics could never be “truly American.”

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<sup>70</sup> Mrs. R. W. Macdonell, “Teaching Immigrants English” (July 1915), 3–4, Adult Year Book 1915-1917, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries; Barnes, “The Gulf Coast,” 4.

<sup>71</sup> “Fifteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 169.

Even more than the language they used, the WMC's approach to immigrant work separated them from others concerned with immigration at this time. Historians have cast these women and other social gospel reformers as conservative for trying to "Americanize" immigrants. But compared to responses from other entities, including Christian ones, that spanned urging the closing of the border to proposing a "final solution" for minority groups, Methodist women's attempt to help immigrants adapt to their new lives could be considered a "genuinely progressive, if not Christian, response." Ellen Blue writes that "attempting to meet what they saw as the immigrants' greatest need (to adapt to America) is a moderate response, especially compared with the Ku Klux Klan and various other violent anti-immigrant groups that arose over the next few decades."<sup>72</sup> Just the fact that the WMC believed immigrants could be "true" Americans separated them from anti-immigrant agitators.

The WMC never stopped trying to convert Catholics, but conversion made up just a small part of their overall efforts. This is perfectly illustrated by an example from St. Mark's Hall, a MECS mission in New Orleans. The head deaconess described their "Pleasant Sunday Evening" program, "with its informal evangelistic service of song and prayer and story in English and Italian, affords fellowship and teaching through self-expression, and is a means of self-discovery to a goodly number whose lives are very narrow." These informal gatherings acted as a "stepping-stone" to connection to the Methodist church. She was also assisted by the "zealous endeavors of our Italian helper, Mr. Lui Pagani, one of our 'first fruits.'" A year after implementing the program, she happily reported that "some twenty or more of our people have united with Second Methodist Church." She made special note that "the roster of their names is unique: Pagani, Messina, Manescalpe, La Cerva, Rizzuto, Di Andrea, etc." The deaconess was

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<sup>72</sup> Blue, *St. Mark's and the Social Gospel*, 44–45.

certainly proud of the converts she had claimed to her congregation, but what is striking is how miniscule the number seems compared to the scope of their other work. In the same year twenty Catholics joined the Methodist church, the women workers made 700 home visits and 104 hospital visits and ran cooking and sewing schools, a kindergarten, a clinic, and a traveling nurse program. They treated 430 patients in the clinic and made 280 nursing visits. Clearly the evangelist aspect of their work was but one small part of their overall mission in the city, and religion was no barrier to receiving their help.<sup>73</sup>

Though the Klan spoke of all Jews and Catholics as invaders amongst “true” Americans, the WMC recognized that not all non-Protestants were immigrants. In fact, the women sometimes worked closely with those of other religions in their charitable work. Reporting on cooperative work with other boards in Albany, Georgia, Elizabeth Hughes wrote in 1917, “Working with me during each month (the personnel changing each succeeding month) are representatives of the various Churches. One month it was the Episcopal rector, with a Jewish and a Baptist lady, respectively, serving with me on the Relief Committee. Another month it was the Methodist minister, with an Episcopal and a Catholic lady.”<sup>74</sup> The deaconess working in cotton mill communities in Mobile, Alabama reported in 1927 that the Council of Jewish Women had provided teachers for three of their sewing classes and another “Jewish friend” taught a music class “consisting of eight of our little girls.”<sup>75</sup> Nettie Stroup, head deaconess for St. Mark’s Hall in 1933, recounted how the Jewish leaders of Mount Sinai Temple asked them to join them in an interdenominational debating club, the first debate concerning “Resolved, that

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<sup>73</sup> “Second Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 358; “Third Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 161–62.

<sup>74</sup> “Seventh Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 383.

<sup>75</sup> “Seventeenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1927), 212.

the American Indian has been more cruelly treated in North America in the last four hundred years than has the Negro.” Stroup noted, “One special aim of the club is to promote friendship and fellowship among the young people of the different churches throughout the city.”<sup>76</sup>

Nowhere did the WMC break with their race and class more than when they boldly welcomed immigrants into their church pews, an action that was met with much resistance by the church itself. Direct work with immigrants was mostly limited to Wesley Houses, found in cities and areas with many factories or mines. But the WMC challenged its members to consider their role in welcoming the immigrant to their church. Study literature for the local auxiliaries in the late 1920s shared pointed anecdotes about the treatment foreigners had received at the hands of Christians, driving the point home that these kinds of actions led people away from the faith. A Jewish family was driven away from a congregation by its criticism, and a “Mohammedan” studying in America told a group of Christian students in Nashville, “No man need try to convert me to Christianity so long as I constantly meet insult and discrimination in this your fair city, discrimination because of the color of my skin.” When the MECS women opened a Wesley House in a Mexican district in San Antonio in 1912, “the difficulties encountered by [the deaconesses] were not so much those involved in the task of winning the Mexicans as in the overcoming of racial prejudice in the American churches.” Nonetheless, the San Antonio Wesley House played a crucial role to “conserve and strengthen the neighborhood Mexican Church.”<sup>77</sup>

The WMC literature condemned Methodists’ refusal to welcome immigrants into their own congregations. It shared the story of a young Mexican who had converted through the influence of a Wesley House and joined their Mexican church. But one evening he visited a Methodist church across the city and upon confirming that he was indeed Mexican, an usher

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<sup>76</sup> “Twenty Third Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 219.

<sup>77</sup> Haskin, *Women and Missions in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, 209.

seated him in the corner, apart from the rest of the congregation. The pamphlet recounted that the boy said, “if this is Christianity, I have not understood it,” and he became indifferent and drifted away from the church. The writer was pointed in her rebuke of local congregations in contributing to this crisis:

The home missionary is constantly hindered by the attitude of our Churches toward the groups that she is serving. Most of our new aliens live in segregated districts, perhaps by choice, influenced by cheap rent and a feeling of strangeness. They doubtless feel more at home in a new country among their own kind, yet this is no excuse for the Churches. It must be admitted that very few of our Churches have the largeness of heart and the necessary freedom from prejudice to receive these strangers into their well-dressed congregations. Even when led out into service for these groups, the segregation line is strictly observed. Sometimes unattractive chapels are built to which pastors are appointed who must live upon the most meager salary. At other times Christian social settlements are established and missionaries and deaconesses sent to live among the people. The congregations consider these their representatives, and in this way feel that their obligation is discharged...So long as any congregation is unwilling to receive any human being into its fold, it is not worthy the name of its Master.<sup>78</sup>

In large cities of this time period, income levels could vary significantly within a few blocks.<sup>79</sup>

The Wesley Houses were often attached or affiliated with a local congregation, making this the logical church home for its converted patrons. Estelle Haskin, in a 1927 tract, condemned missions that would separate immigrants from the rest of the church, writing, “Large groups of working men are alienated from the Church and cannot be won to the church by sending them a worker or building them a chapel which segregates them from our corporate Church life.”<sup>80</sup> Regardless of where an immigrant might choose to attend church, local congregations had an obligation to welcome them.

This study literature was sent to auxiliaries across the MECS, undoubtedly to dozens of chapters that had little to no direct contact with immigrants. Even so, the literature spoke directly

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<sup>78</sup> Haskin, “Foreign Missions in the Homeland,” 4–6.

<sup>79</sup> Blue, *St. Mark’s and the Social Gospel*, 52.

<sup>80</sup> Estelle Haskin, “Home Missions Facing New Situations” (September 1927), 5, Adult Year Book 1926-1927, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

to them, asking them to imagine what it would be like to be a stranger in a new land. The author pressed all auxiliaries to carefully consider the attitude of their congregation if there were a deaconess or home worker serving in their community. “Would she feel free to bring her people into your Church?” the author prodded, “Discuss fully, for this is a real test of the life of your Church.” It did not matter whether a congregation might actually be faced with this possibility; the auxiliaries had a responsibility to create a church culture that would rise to the occasion.

The literature used these examples to show that unkindness toward immigrants had far-reaching effects. The women often talked about how immigrants could be missionaries themselves. Many immigrants returned home, and if they could be converted before they did, they could carry that message with them. In an article for *Our Homes*, Mary Helm called this “the union of home and foreign missions.”<sup>81</sup> The women gave so much time and attention to foreign missionaries, and the actions of Christians in the United States could ruin all of their missionaries’ hard work. The study literature told of a Korean woman who had been ecstatic to visit the “Jesus country.” “All of the white people with whom she had come in contact in her own country were missionaries,” the article explained, “and the Korean woman immediately concluded that they represented all Americans.” But after three years in America, “no Christian had ever given her a kindly greeting or invited her to attend Church; her sons had told her that there was nothing to Christianity, and her heart was broken.”<sup>82</sup>

In the late 1920s, Methodist work began to lose much of the urgency to “Americanize” felt earlier in the century. After the Johnson-Reed Act went into effect, the surge of immigration slowed to a trickle. The WMC did not cease working with these groups, but they started thinking more critically about how they talked about and aided immigrants. In particular, the WMC no

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<sup>81</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 71.

<sup>82</sup> “Foreign Missions in the Homeland,” 3.



longer saw immigrants as a unique mission field, separate from other groups they served. In 1926, Dr. Jay S. Stowell addressed the WMC's annual session. Stowell was a prominent member of the northern-based Methodist Episcopal Church and served as a Director on its Board of Home Missions. He reflected on the past fifteen years of work with immigrants, telling the women, "A million newcomers a year, year after year, was a situation to conjure with. We talked freely about the foreigner and his family, about the immigration problem, and about 'Americanization.' In the name of the latter we did some very crude and very unwise things." Estelle Haskin reflected on Stowell's address in her 1927 pamphlet, "Home Missions Facing New Situations." She pointed out that most of the people living in the "'foreign-speaking' colonies" in American cities had been in the country for at least a decade, sometimes two or more decades, their children and grandchildren growing up there. It was no longer wise to consider the entirety of the one-third of the population who were first or second-generation immigrants as a home mission field. Haskin admitted that there were many in that group still "outside of the Church," but many more were "regular members of our American Protestant Churches." "To continue to speak and think of our foreign-language group as a unit," she wrote, "seems to be doing an injustice to the facts, and, more serious than that, to tend to delay and hinder the very process which we claim to be trying to promote – namely, the incorporation of these newcomers as integral part of our national life." The WMC continued to send deaconesses to work in industrial areas with high numbers of first and second-generation immigrants into the 1930s. But the WMC rarely spoke in that decade of immigrants as a mission field unto itself, instead pulling these communities into their work with rural areas, industry, and children. The nature of immigration to the US had changed, and the WMC was ready to change with it.

Though the WMC continued to talk about converting others to Christianity, in the late 1920s, some WMC leaders began to acknowledge the value of non-Protestant religious instruction to the well-being of Americans. In earlier decades, WMC authors wrote passionately about the need to convert all of the country to Protestant Christianity. But in the late 1920s, some began instead emphasizing those who lacked any religious training whatsoever. Mrs. J. W. Downs, the WMC secretary for home work wrote in 1927, “With more than twenty million boys and girls who have no religious training in either Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish Church, our effort cannot be decreased.”<sup>83</sup> Similarly, in 1931, the Chairman of the Commission on Unoccupied Mission Areas, Mrs. Lee Britt, wrote, “there are more than forty-three million who are not identified with any religious organization — Protestant, Jewish, or Catholic. Of this number, twenty million are young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty years who are receiving no religious instruction.”<sup>84</sup> Though the women would undoubtedly prefer the irreligious to receive Protestant instruction, the fact that they preferred Jewish or Catholic training over no training at all demonstrates how much their attitude toward non-Protestants had changed over the course of thirty years.

The WMC work with immigrants in their communities was important. Their deaconesses taught immigrants English, provided food, milk, and clothes for struggling families, enrolled their children in kindergartens and day nurseries. But perhaps more important was the battle they fought at the national level against a vitriolic, popular narrative regarding immigrants. The WMC voiced their own concerns regarding Catholicism and immigrant criminality, especially in the beginning of the century. But their experiences in the war, combined with the experiences of

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<sup>83</sup> “Seventeenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 64.

<sup>84</sup> “Twenty First Annual Report of the Woman’s Home Mission Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church South” (Nashville: MECS, n.d.), 161.

deaconesses and home missionaries working in the field, helped the WMC embrace a more pluralistic vision of the social gospel. All people were redeemable. All people were worthy of their aid and teaching. In this vision, immigrants would hopefully convert to Christianity, yes, but regardless they could contribute their unique cultures and ideas to a diverse United States. The WMC spoke warmly of immigrants, defending their right to become citizens and voters, their right to safe and well-paying jobs, and their right to be treated with respect and dignity. They celebrated their cultures and encouraged them to maintain their native languages. Mary Clark Barnes, who in 1919 suggested discarding the figure of the melting pot, instead suggested they “take for our symbol...a living tree with many ingrafted stocks organically related to each other, sharing a common life, bearing various fruits, differing in foliage, no two leaves exactly alike, but all combining to provide shelter and refreshment to the world.”<sup>85</sup> Again and again, they broke away from others of their race and class, insisting that God had created immigrants, like themselves, “in his own image, in the image of God created he him.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Barnes, “The Gulf Coast,” 5.

<sup>86</sup> DeBardeleben, “The New American in Labor Reconstruction,” 10.

## Chapter Five

“They live in the slums we built for them:” From Paternalism to Interracialism in

### Work for and with Black Southerners

In the late 1910s, Lily Hammond was disappointed in her church. She had spent the last three decades as a leader in the women’s missionary societies, and her husband John had served the MECS faithfully as a pastor. Lily Hammond had spent years persuading other white Methodist women of their responsibility to care for and aid black women and their families. But after a few tumultuous years as president of Paine College, John Hammond left his position at the black college and Lily left disenchanted with the church’s approach to race relations. Lily realized the methods of the church were not addressing the root of the problems facing black southerners. The church, in its current state, had done all it could – or would – for race relations, and she, along with other members of the Woman’s Missionary Council, looked for new allies to fight discrimination and social inequity.

The first four decades of the twentieth century brought rapid change to the ways in which white Methodist women approached the issue of racial equality. This is a story of how Methodist women came to understand and grapple with the race problem in America and in the South through three key phases. In the 1900s and early 1910s, WMC women became increasingly involved in issues of race. However, their work was largely limited to the issue of “race relations” and social work. Women like Mary DeBardeleben established settlement houses in black neighborhoods. A number of state conferences and local chapters supplied financial support for young black women to attend trainings, for community centers in black communities, and for religious texts, classes, and daily Bible schools. Though interested in helping alleviate the practical problems black southerners faced, the WMC was not able to articulate how these

problems were aligned with economic inequality. Instead they focused on bettering relations between whites and blacks, providing spiritual classes and guidance, and training black women in the proper [white] way to keep the home. The WMC believed they could fix the race problem by fixing African Americans, embracing paternalism as their solution.

This approach changed radically in the late 1910s, when WMC leaders like Lily Hammond grew disillusioned with the steps taken by the white church. Hammond and other leaders' decision to look outside of the church for the next steps in race work was a watershed moment in how white Methodist women approached the issue of racial equality. The WMC moved to establish strong ties to secular and ecumenical organizations, sometimes founded and often led by Methodist women, which helped them draw their members' focus to race issues in new ways.<sup>1</sup> Carrie Parks Johnson and Sara Estelle Haskin, two prominent WMC leaders, were paramount to the establishment of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC) women's department. Through initiatives such as this, the WMC cautiously moved from financial assistance and welfare work to actual advocacy on behalf of and in collaboration with African Americans. In the 1920s, the WMC followed the lead of organizations like the CIC, which championed an interracial approach to race issues. White reformers worked with black leaders to better understand the issues blacks faced. Black activists asked white reformers to learn through experience by developing relationships with blacks and working together to solve problems.<sup>2</sup> WMC leadership encouraged their members to study African American housing, employment, and education in their communities and to reach out to black members of their community to learn more. They often worked with the women of the Colored Episcopal Church to identify where their funds and support would be best used.

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<sup>1</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 84–87.

<sup>2</sup> Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, 262–65.

In the 1930s, the WMC entered a third phase of racial work, one that would propel them into civil rights activism in the post-World War II era. The WMC spoke out publicly against lynching starting in 1913, and by the 1930s, Methodist women were leading the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL) and incorporating ASWPL platforms into their national meetings. The scourge of lynching in the South motivated Methodist women to take action in ways other race issues had not. In taking on the mantle of the anti-lynching crusade, white women were forced to face the complicity of whites in issues of black inequality and discrimination in new and profound ways. For the first time, members of the WMC considered the possibility that white people were the problem.

By the close of the decade, the southern Methodists rejoined the northern Methodists. This unification subsumed the WMC into a national women's organization of the new Methodist church, with different leadership and priorities. The result was that after 1939, southern white Methodist women led a national organization on issues of race, and in the mid-century South, they were some of the most important southern white supporters of the civil rights movement. Despite the shortcomings of white Methodist women involvement in race issues in the early twentieth century, these women were still engaging in racial progress unmatched by their white southern peers. The story of the years between their first timid contributions to a black school and their takeover of a national organization poised to call for desegregation is one of sweeping changes in southern white Methodist women's attitude toward African Americans and the role they might play in racial equality.

The story of these decades of Methodist work in race unfolds through the decisions and actions of key women leaders. Though these decades are largely a time of progress and development in Methodist women's thinking about race issues, WMC work was fraught with

contradictions and limitations, as the women worked through their own biases. At times their work was timid while at others it was sweeping. They would welcome black women's input in one setting while in another mute them. They inserted their settlement houses in black communities to help alleviate problems, but they failed to denounce racial economic inequality. Mary DeBardeleben and Lilly Hammond were both pioneers in white Methodist reaction to black inequality, yet DeBardeleben struggled to define this inequality or to root out the causes at the heart of it while Hammond became disenchanted with the slow progress made by the church. Carrie Parks Johnson and Sara Estelle Haskin were crucial to the establishment of the women's arm of the CIC, a pioneering civil rights initiative in the South. But the most radical aspects of their actions were diminished by their inability or unwillingness to cede power to black women. Though certainly not the only Methodist women working on issues of race during this time, key leaders' stories illustrate the complexity of WMC involvement in race relations and civil rights. Each of these women were heavily involved in race issues during the 1910s, '20s, and '30s, working in their own ways to bring more attention to the plight of African Americans. Their stories illuminate the three phases of Methodist women's involvement in race work and the developments that took place.

In the first phase of Methodist women's work on race issues, their efforts largely centered on financial support. Southern Methodist women's first foray into work with African Americans occurred in 1900 when Paine College requested funds for a new building on its campus. A black school in Augusta, Georgia, Paine had originally been a joint project of the MECS and the CME. This proposed building would be used to teach vocational skills to black girls. Though the request was turned down in 1900, due to lack of funds, the women approved the request in 1901.

Over the next two years, they raised \$5,000 for the building, enacting the first race relations work among organized white southern church women.<sup>3</sup>

Though a simple monetary donation, much is revealed about the Methodist women through this early foray into race work. According to Methodist historian Alice Knotts, motivations for the Paine project were mixed: “Paine College president, Dr. Walker, desired to develop a co-educational campus; potential students dreamed of obtaining a quality liberal arts education; and white middle- and upper-class women of the Southern Methodist Episcopal Church, South, hoped the new women’s program would train excellent domestic workers.” This tension between liberal arts education and technical training would cause issues for Paine College and its supporters in the years to come. But in these early days, leaders of the Methodist organization, then called the Woman’s Home Mission Society, tried to instill in members a sense of duty toward black southerners. This was often framed through images of the domestic servants working in members’ kitchens. The general secretary, Tochie MacDonnell, told her members, “As a home evangelizing force, we must define more clearly our relation to our colored sisters that live among us. God has placed them in our midst, not from their or our volition, and we must help them to higher ideals of Christian integrity and to righteous living.” And perhaps in response to the push back from members of the organization regarding the Paine project, MacDonnell tried to make white women’s care for black women they personally knew extend to black women at large. She said, “Many, many Christian women of our Church are using the opportunities for [evangelizing black women] in their kitchens, but we need to have back of this effort the united force of organization.” Jacquelyn Dowd Hall called this the “maternalistic beginnings” of white Methodist race work in the South, in which black girls could

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<sup>3</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 84–85.



learn to be competent servants at Paine College while also acquiring the knowledge to be moral guardians for their families. In supporting Paine, white women could support their own domestic tranquility while ostensibly improving the homes of African American women.<sup>4</sup>

It was a decade later, however, that Methodist women moved beyond monetary donations to direct involvement and undertook maternalism on a larger scale. In 1911, they voted to support Mary DeBardeleben, the first woman appointed to work specifically with African Americans by the WMC. DeBardeleben brought this about largely through her personal conviction that this work was necessary. However, her path to initiating this work was difficult. A well-educated, upper class southern woman, DeBardeleben faced strong pushback from her family and church leadership on her decision to work with blacks. Yet DeBardeleben continued with her plans because of the influence of fellow white reformers and leaders, as well as black women who prodded her to pursue a program they viewed as helpful to their community. DeBardeleben's settlement house would establish a new trend in the WMC of social work in black communities. Though these houses did not address the root problems of black poverty and inequality, they at least addressed some of the symptoms, usually those identified by black women as the most pressing.

DeBardeleben was committed to missions from a young age, but she took a winding path to mission work among black southerners. Mission work was founded on the paternalistic idea that the subjects, whether foreigners, immigrants, or African Americans, needed white men and women to teach them the proper way to believe and live. DeBardeleben, daughter of a Methodist minister and raised on her grandmother's Alabama plantation, had trained at Columbia Teachers

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<sup>4</sup> Alice G. Knotts, *Fellowship of Love: Methodist Women Changing American Racial Attitudes, 1920-1968* (Nashville, Tenn: Kingswood Books, 1996), 42; "Fifteenth Annual Report of the Woman's Home Mission Society," 9; Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry*, 71.

College. The summer before she was set to begin work at the Alabama Normal College, DeBardeleben had a religious experience at a youth conference in North Carolina. She decided then to dedicate her life to missions, with the intention of undertaking work in Japan. However, over the next few years, DeBardeleben often felt her place was closer to home, working with black southerners. A mentor of DeBardeleben, Sara Estelle Haskin, described her struggle, writing “A number of years before God had spoken to this young woman on one Christmas Eve making her understand that she was unworthy of appointment to a foreign field unless she were willing to minister to the Negroes at her own door.” She was heavily influenced by her upbringing on her family’s plantation, in which blacks living there had, in her eyes, low moral standards and dismal living and working conditions. The eyes of blacks she knew, she wrote, seemed to constantly accuse: “‘So my *Christian* friend,’ they seemed to say, ‘you are going to Japan. What about America, what about the South? What about us?’” But DeBardeleben found little support in her circle. Both her parents and her bishop discouraged her from seeking this work. In fact, the bishop at Birmingham told her “that there was no opening for a Southern white woman to work with Negroes and that she was needed in Japan.” She entered Scarritt College resigned to training for mission in Japan.<sup>5</sup>

But DeBardeleben’s time at Scarritt only reinforced her desire to do her mission work at home. There she found herself among those “who were trying to be Christian and yet relate our Christianity to the social movement, then stirring mightily, and to the liberal interpretation of the Bible.” She also met Sara Estelle Haskin. Prior to serving as faculty and the head of the Community Service Department at Scarritt, Haskin had been a settlement worker for the WMC

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<sup>5</sup> Sara Estelle Haskin, *Women and Missions in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1925), 221; “The Winsome Call” (nd), 60, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries; Mary DeBardeleben to Louise Young, August 31, 1936, in Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry*, 72.

in Texas, where she opened the first settlement house in Dallas in 1902. Through Haskin, DeBardeleben met Sallie Hill Sawyer, an elderly black woman known as “Mother Sawyer.” Sawyer had long been active in her Nashville community, caring for children whose parents worked. A 1934 CME history recounted that Sawyer “lifted her soul in fervent prayer” for her people, who suffered from low wages, discrimination, and a lack of access to education. The history continued, “as if in answer to her prayer, Mother Sawyer learned of the work that the Southern Methodist women were doing for her neglected white people of the city through their Wesley Houses,” and “a hope was born in her heart for similar work for her own people.”<sup>6</sup>

Sawyer appealed to the white Methodist women in Nashville to create something in the black community similar to the Wesley Houses that served poor whites. She met with Tochie MacDonnell, the general secretary of the MECS Woman’s Board of Home Missions, who sent her to Haskin, and Sawyer shared information about the problems her people faced. She told Haskin “of the children of her race who had no place to play except the back alleys; of those who were left with neighbors all day while their mothers worked away from home; of those who were stricken with disease but could be cured if a clinic were available.” In response, Haskin and DeBardeleben started a sewing school and a teacher-training class in Capers’ Chapel, a CME church. Sawyer continued requesting help from the WMC, and a few years after DeBardeleben opened the first settlement house for African Americans in Augusta, Georgia, the WMC appropriated funds for Sawyer to run a settlement house in Nashville.<sup>7</sup>

DeBardeleben and Haskin’s early foray into settlement work amongst African Americans is revelatory of a phenomenon at the heart of early WMC work. Mother Sawyer’s appeal to the

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<sup>6</sup> Mrs. L. D. (Sara) McAfee, *History of the Women’s Missionary Society in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church* (Jackson, TN: Publishing House, CME Church, 1934), 177–80.

<sup>7</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 84–87; Brown, “The Winsome Call,” 60–62.

white women was not a happy accident. According to historian Mary E. Frederickson, black women set the agenda for white women by carefully navigating a rhetorical minefield. They prodded the white women toward issues that were vital to the black community but without transgressing rigid lines of racial hierarchy and power. Frederickson demonstrates how black women negotiated these relationships with white women in ways that furthered their aims without putting themselves in danger by openly challenging white women. She argues that black women successfully convinced white women to pursue the priorities and strategies the black women had set by the “process of transformation.” According to Frederickson, black women used this process to “convert their concerns about the economic and social conditions faced by black southerners into a format that was accessible but not threatening to white women, one that could be incorporated into the white agenda for social change.” They did this by posturing deference, consistently complimenting and thanking white women for their help, and giving them credit for any successes. They followed up this deference with directive, shielding their more forthright requests behind an obeisance to white women. The result was collaboration based on mutual dependence, in which black women received resources from white women and white women “came to rely heavily on their counterparts in the black church for help in developing reform agendas and in carrying out interracial programs.”<sup>8</sup>

Sawyer purposefully sought out the white Methodist women after seeing how the Wesley Houses served poor whites. Sawyer, like many other black women, “translated the massive economic and social needs of individuals and groups in the black community into a format that could be clearly understood by white women reformers.” White reformers incorporated this information into their own agenda. “Black women,” Frederickson argues, “in a way largely

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<sup>8</sup> Frederickson, “‘Each One Is Dependent on the Other’: Southern Churchwomen, Racial Reform, and the Process of Transformation, 1880-1940,” 297–98, 311.

invisible to whites, controlled the process: they determined which needs were most pressing, they suggested solutions, and in most cases they did the work of setting up and running the programs.” When Haskin and DeBardeleben set up the sewing school and teaching-training center, Sawyer was pleased but not satisfied. She “continued to pray” – and agitate on behalf of her community – until the Tennessee Conference of the WMC asked for permission to contribute funds. Sawyer used those funds to rent a house, where she was the house mother and worked “with her people, opening up larger and larger opportunities for them.”<sup>9</sup>

Sawyer’s influence was crucial to the beginnings of the WMC work. She set an agenda that DeBardeleben took with her to the WMC annual meeting. Despite the backlash from her family and pastors, DeBardeleben stood fast, and in 1911 she asked the WMC to sponsor her work. The council heard her “controversial request” in a meeting closed to the public and the press. The council agreed to appoint DeBardeleben for work amongst African Americans, the first such appointee by the WMC. The South Georgia Conference agreed to pay her first year’s salary, and she was sent to work in Augusta, Georgia.<sup>10</sup>

DeBardeleben set up her settlement house in an abandoned saloon in a community adjacent to the Paine College campus. The WMC called these programs for blacks “Bethlehem Centers.” The center provided recreation, cooking and manual skill or shop classes, a kindergarten, and religious services. DeBardeleben and subsequent directors were assisted by faculty and students from Paine, who used the settlement as a “sort of social work laboratory.” Louise Young, the dean of students at Paine who would later serve as the chair of the WMC Committee on Interracial Cooperation, supervised student volunteers. The center eventually grew to include two more buildings and two satellite projects in Augusta. DeBardeleben only stayed at

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<sup>9</sup> Frederickson, 313; Brown, “The Winsome Call,” 62.

<sup>10</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 86.

the Augusta Bethlehem Center for a little over a year, though she continued working with the WMC. In the Bethlehem Centers, the WMC focused primarily on improving the African American home, teaching women skills in cooking and housekeeping, advocating for better education, and providing religious instruction and services. By 1940, eight Bethlehem Centers operated in the South.

DeBardeleben's ideas about race were complicated. She struggled to square her experiences with blacks on her family's plantation with new relationships with African Americans outside of her home community. Her interactions and relationships with blacks challenged some of her preconceived notions about them, but she still viewed blacks as inadequate and in need of her help. While studying at Columbia University, DeBardeleben befriended blacks beyond her family's plantation for the first time; "until that time she had known Negroes intimately only as her beloved nurse and playmates; now she saw them as college students with trained minds and cultured tastes." Yet she was compelled to pursue mission work among black communities not only because of the poverty found there but how she perceived their morality as well. She later shared an anecdote that was important to her decision to forego foreign missions. She was teaching back home a few years after leaving Columbia when her uncle entered the house, and said "Do you know that there is not a sober man or woman on this place tonight?" Troubled by this, DeBardeleben was motivated to help the people "in her own Southland and even on her uncle's plantation [that were] in great need."

In the views of reformers like DeBardeleben, race problems and black poverty were not caused by economic or political structures but by the way that African Americans lived. By helping them pursue education, industry, and sobriety – perhaps through Bethlehem Centers –

white reformers could solve race problems by reforming black people.<sup>11</sup> Like almost all white reformers of the era, DeBardeleben kept white people at the center of the reform work. “Through this experience [with Sawyer] Miss DeBardeleben became convinced that Christian white women could effectively aid Negro women and children,” wrote an early Methodist history, “Her year at the Methodist Training School convinced her of this fact.”<sup>12</sup> Though reformers like DeBardeleben and Haskin were happy to work with black women in certain circumstances, they continued to embrace a paternalistic approach to race work that said black people needed whites’ help.<sup>13</sup>

The WMC eventually shifted away from paternalism, influenced by new ideas of interracialism developed following the First World War. The shift in WMC action away from paternalism was heavily influenced by the work of Lily Hardy Hammond. A leader in the Methodist women’s missionary movement since the late 1800s, Hammond wrote prolifically on the topic of social welfare, reform, and race for both Methodist publications and regional and national secular publications. Her unique background gave her an uncommon understanding of these issues. She was born Lilly Hardy in 1859 in New Jersey to parents who had recently moved there from South Carolina. Both of Hammond’s parents had come from prominent slaveholding families. Hammond often overstated her connection to slavery, sharing memories of playing with enslaved children as a child. But, as historian Elina C. Green noted, Hammond would not have known any enslaved children living in New Jersey on the brink of emancipation. Green argues that Hammond stressed her ties to the Old South in an “attempt to shore up any doubts about her ‘southernness,’ since southern whites were notoriously suspicious of so-called outside agitators.”

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<sup>11</sup> Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, 75.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, “The Winsome Call,” 61.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, 60–61.

Hammond was educated at the Packer Institute, a prestigious girls' school in Brooklyn. Though it is unclear whether Hammond attended a post-secondary school, this secondary education would have been unlike anything available in the South. As a teenager, she visited New York tenement houses and worked in an urban mission, until her family found out and made her quit. Hammond's ties to virtuous southern families gave her credibility with southern audiences, and her quality education combined with a deep knowledge of the advances in northern reform work allowed her to speak authoritatively to southern audiences about an area of life they had not encountered.<sup>14</sup>

In 1879, Hammond married John Dennis Hammond, a Methodist minister, and like his wife, a child of a slaveholding family. After graduating from the University of Georgia, John moved to New Jersey to attend Drew Theological Seminary, one of the most liberal institutions in either the North or the South. There he presumably met Lily, and together they returned to the South. Like the families of other itinerant Methodist preachers, the Hammonds moved several times in the early years of their marriage. Lily had considerable cache with local Methodist women as the wife of a preacher, and she enthusiastically joined the local Methodist women's organization wherever they lived. Throughout this time, Lily wrote essays for various publications on social reform and the social gospel, which came to the attention of regional leadership in the home mission organization. By 1895, she had been appointed to the Leaflets and Education committee of the regional organization.<sup>15</sup> In 1898, John was appointed secretary to the Board of Education of the MECS, and he and Lily moved to Nashville, the home of the Methodist regional conference as well as most of the leaders of the church and the women's organizations. In that first year in Nashville, Lily was elected vice president of the newly formed

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<sup>14</sup> Hammond and Green, *In Black and White*, vii–ix.

<sup>15</sup> Hammond and Green, xiii–xiv.



Woman's Board of Home Missions. A year later, she was appointed the first superintendent of the Bureau of Social Service.<sup>16</sup>

Around the turn of the century, Hammond's publications gained steam. She published "A Southern View of the Negro" in the national journal *Outlook* in 1903, summarizing her early views on race issues. Hammond argued that racial discrimination and violence in the South was being tempered by a growing class of Southern whites who had more moderate views on race. She dealt in common racist tropes, describing poor blacks as childish, lacking in gratitude, shiftless, and lacking work ethic and morals. She also noted for her readers the presence of many "chaste" and "honest" blacks, as well as the presence of "equally ignorant" whites. These "honorable negros" all held the respect of their white neighbors. Unlike many of her peers, however, Hammond attributed these shortcomings to a lack of development rather than true racial inferiority. With the help of white reformers and "a few generations of reasonable patience," she argued, "the negro will have passed this trying point." Like DeBardeleben, Hammond centered white women in the supposed development of black people, writing, "In their painful progress from barbarism the negroes owe much to the Christian Southern women of the past, and more than is known to those of the present." At no point in this publication did Hammond fault white people or political and corporate institutions for black poverty. She defends black disenfranchisement in great detail, arguing that these actions prevent "the manipulation of the ignorant colored vote by a few unscrupulous whites" until the time blacks can be properly educated and "fit for citizenship."<sup>17</sup>

Hammond believed that white women were increasingly awakening to their role in aiding black southerners. She explained the structure of Paine College – and Methodist women's

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<sup>16</sup> Hammond and Green, xviii–xx.

<sup>17</sup> Hammond and Green, 18, 123–27.

involvement in it – to her northern audience, giving it as a “sign, small but significant, of a growing desire among Southern women to help their darker neighbors through organized effort.” She echoed the oft-held belief of the time that industrial training was “the final solution of the whole difficult [race] problem.” But this type of training should only be given to the most morally sound blacks, she said, writing, “It is always both an easy and a dangerous thing to develop the minds of ignorant people faster than their moral natures; and many of the negroes have been thrust into a new world to which they are imperfectly related mentally, and not all related morally.”<sup>18</sup>

Hammond spent the next couple of years in and out of a sanitarium for unknown reasons but likely tuberculosis. Though her published writings dwindled during these years, she kept up with the activities of southern Methodist women. In 1907 she sent a letter encouraging the Woman’s Home Mission Society to continue its financial support of Paine College, and the leadership printed this in their annual report.

Dear women, while I am still an officer among you, let me say one word for something very near my heart. Some of you know how keenly concerned I have been from the beginning in our work for the negroes. When I was too little to understand how right it is, I always had to fight for the under dog; and the more I understand the spirit of Christ and the love of God, the more I feel that the greatest debt is to the neediest. . . . It is the Christian women of the white race who more than any other class can solve and dissolve the race problem, save our dear land from dishonor, and lift helplessness and ignorance into a new and hopeful life. Stand by our school at Paine.<sup>19</sup>

Snippets of this quote feature prominently in scholarly writing on Lily Hammond, particularly her argument that “Christian women of the white race” were especially needed to solve the race problem. Her letter encapsulates her early belief that centered white women in a solution that blamed blacks for their problems, effectively letting all complicit actors off the hook.

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<sup>18</sup> Hammond and Green, 18, 123–27.

<sup>19</sup> “Twenty First Annual Report of the Woman’s Home Mission Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church South,” 17–18.

But such a brief quote does not do service to the complexity of Hammond's developing attitudes toward race in her later writings, including toward southern whites' complicity in the problems blacks faced and the necessity of white action. In 1911, John was appointed president of Paine College and the Hammonds moved to Augusta. The years Lily spent at Paine College challenged and reshaped her views on race. Lily had been an outspoken supporter of Paine College for years, lifting it up as an example of white support of blacks for her northern readership and encouraging her fellow Methodist women to continue supporting it. She had advocated strongly for the women's society to build the women's annex at Paine in 1901, and she and John had raised funds for the institution for years afterward. Though Hammond had been an outspoken supporter of race relations for many years, John's post at Paine College brought her into consistent contact with African Americans for the first time, making her part of "a select sisterhood of white women whose lives were tied to (and changed by) the region's black colleges."<sup>20</sup>

Black education reform was a central focus of white progressives. The establishment or improvement of schools for black students usually required resources and investment from whites, but it also required buy-in from black communities. In his study of progressive education reform, William Link concluded that "either complete white control or total black autonomy would manifestly fail," thus requiring of these efforts an interracial cooperation that reformers were interested in during the early twentieth century. But this interracial work to advance black education was full of tension. Despite efforts to work together, black schools were often beholden to the white control that came with their funding and the particular curricular priorities

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<sup>20</sup> Hammond and Green, *In Black and White*, xxvii–xxviii.

the funder wanted the school to pursue. Black leaders and reformers grew increasingly resentful of the racist assumptions of industrial education.<sup>21</sup>

John Hammond was caught in these exact conflicts over who should control schools and what type of curriculum should be taught during his tumultuous time at Paine. These disagreements were exacerbated by the school's serious financial problems. During his years as secretary of the Board of Education, John had repeatedly lobbied, unsuccessfully, for greater financial support of Paine. When he took over at Paine, the college was in a great deal of debt and in the middle of a transition from a liberal arts college to a vocational school along the lines of Tuskegee. John struggled to right the school's finances, and he was caught in a maelstrom of tension over the roles of whites and blacks in the running of the school. He resisted pressure from trustees to automatically hire graduates of Paine when openings became available. Shortly after joining Paine, John fired two black employees. He blamed the matron of the girls' dormitory, Mrs. J.A. Walker, for a four-thousand-dollar debt he found in the account books, and he discovered a science teacher, Mr. Waddell, "was attempting the ruin of two girl students." Both employees had strong ties to the CME church, and John lost a great deal of clout with these firings. Many black supporters of Paine, mostly members of the CME church, were frustrated with the degree of white control over the college and began to speak out. Black board members sought greater control over the institution's policies, and white and black faculty clashed over student discipline. According to Hammond's biographer, "John, who seemed to disapprove of the trend toward black 'domination' of the school, as opposed to the ideal of a truly biracial partnership, stumbled through this racial minefield from the moment he and Lily arrived."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, 243–45.

<sup>22</sup> Hammond and Green, *In Black and White*, xxxiii–xxxv.

In many respects, it is difficult to determine whether John Hammond was attempting to stem corruption and nepotism within Paine or if he was just unwilling to cede control of the college to black supporters. Or perhaps it is as Lily's biographer suggests, that John refused to let go of his idealized view of what interracial cooperation would be. Regardless, John was a staunch supporter of liberal arts education at Paine, and he resisted pressure to eradicate the liberal arts in favor of solely providing industrial training. This in itself made John an anomaly among white reformers of the era. For northern philanthropists, southern reformers, and church mission boards, industrial education offered a type of self-help for blacks, in which they could learn not just an employable skill but how to develop sound character. Northern philanthropists, such as the Jeanes Fund and the Rosenwald Fund, poured resources into developing southern "training schools" for blacks that almost exclusively pursued an industrial curriculum. According to historian of the progressive era Dewey Grantham, reformers hoped the emphasis on industrial education "would lead to the development of character, manual skill, and industry among southern blacks." "This kind of emphasis on self-help appealed to both white and black leaders in the South," Grantham writes, "It found expression in two distinct but frequently related efforts – to promote economic advancement and to encourage personal regeneration among southern blacks." This type of reform was mirrored in the work of Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee Institute, and many supporters of Paine thought their college should follow suit. But not all black southerners embraced industrial education. According to historian William Link, training schools "only whetted [many blacks'] appetite for secondary education," and he points to a group of black teachers in North Carolina who "'urgently' prayed that state officials would provide high schools" so their students could study past the seventh grade. Blacks grew increasingly resentful "toward the racist assumptions of industrial education." Disagreement between black leaders

over whether to pursue a model of higher education or industrial education “proved enervating.”<sup>23</sup>

The year after the Hammonds arrived at Paine, only 9 of the 337 students were taking the full college curriculum in pursuance of a liberal arts degree. Even with these dismal numbers, John refused to end the liberal arts program. He expressed his views plainly, writing in his report to the Board of Education for the MECS, “We recognize the need of the race for its own preachers, teachers, and literary men, as well as for its own public servants in the various professions. While we admit the great value of industrial training for the negro, we at the same time believe that the higher college and university training is of still greater value in the present state of his development, because his advancement cannot be secured without competent leadership from his own midst.” Lily Hammond’s own words written about Paine over a decade earlier in “A Southern View of the Negro” seem to capture the tension between liberal arts and industrial education. Though at the time she applauded Paine for “sending out men and women of good scholarship and fine character to become leaders of their race as teachers, preachers, and citizens,” she spoke even more warmly of Paine’s new industrial school. “A final solution for the whole difficult problem,” she wrote, “will be reached for the mass of the race along the lines laid down at Hampton and Tuskegee.”<sup>24</sup>

The years at Paine were a vital era for Lily Hammond. Her writings during and after the tenure at Paine College reveal that she had largely moved away from the paternalistic view that blacks were solely responsible for the problems they faced, and whites were solely and uniquely capable of solving those problems. Hammond never gave direct testimony about the impact of

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<sup>23</sup> Hammond and Green, xxviii; Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 240, 264–65; Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, 245–47.

<sup>24</sup> Hammond and Green, *In Black and White*, xxviii, 123, 125.

her time at Paine on her views, and it is unclear whether this change was a result of direct, consistent contact with black leaders at Paine, the frustrations of the interracial project that was Paine College, or a more general recognition that the South was not making great progress.<sup>25</sup> Regardless of the specific events behind her changed views, Hammond wrote her most influential and controversial text while at Paine, the 1914 book *In Black and White*.

*In Black and White* revealed Hammond's changed views on the role of whites, both their role in creating the conditions blacks faced and their role in fixing these problems. She began the book by salving white readers' worries about where the text might take them. She acknowledged early in the work that "race consciousness" was a necessary "instinct against amalgamation with any very-distantly-related race." With that guard against something truly radical, Hammond then dove into a detailed explanation of all the injustices blacks suffered. She expounded on her argument that white women had a duty to help. Unlike other progressives at the time though, who capitalized on the paternalistic rhetoric of the "white man's burden," Hammond saw whites' role as necessary not because of whites' racial superiority but because of whites' guilt. As an assessment of the fifty years since emancipation, *In Black and White* asked not "how are blacks doing after fifty years of freedom," but rather "how far have whites allowed them to advance in fifty years of freedom?" Hammond saw poverty as the root cause of social problems, including crime, disease, and juvenile delinquency. Whites had a responsibility to fix the problems blacks faced – including ending lynching, creating a cultural respect for African American women, ending Jim Crow streetcars, and improving black access to housing, public health and education – because they had created them in the first place. "They live in the slums we built for them," she wrote.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Hammond and Green, xxxv.

<sup>26</sup> Hammond and Green, xxx–xxxii.

Just as in her letter to the Methodist women in 1907, *In Black and White* made the case that it was truly white Christians, and specifically women, who had a responsibility to fix these problems. She often spoke directly to the church. She acknowledged that church members were the most likely to take action for southern blacks, but she complained that “the pulpits of the South rarely speak of those problems which press upon us all, and for which there is no solution outside the teachings of Christ.” Hammond pressed women to expand their attitude toward their own children to all children. “What things that we desire for our children do Negro children lack?” she asked, “All that we want for our own let us plan for the children of the South, rich and poor, high and low, black and white: strong bodies, clean minds, hands skilled to labour, hearts just and kind and wise.” White women’s “privilege exists for one end only – that it may become the common servitor of all.” Hammond criticized women who would pray for blessings and care for their own children only: “it is strange that we should dare to ask these things of a just God except as we pledge our full strength to effort to secure like good for all the children, the world around, to whom it is denied.” Hammond argued that white women had a special responsibility to black women.

We need, in the first place, to see the women of our poor as women first, and black afterwards. We need a new respect for them in our own minds, as children of the one Father, even as we. We need more faith in the possibilities of the poorest life which is born with a capacity, however limited, for divine things. We need to use our imaginations, to put ourselves in the Negro woman’s place. We will find the exercise as broadening to our own lives as it will be beneficial to the Negro’s. We need to think of Negro womanhood as sacred, as the womanhood of all the world must be.

According to Hammond, women had the ability to do these things without men’s participation or approval. If they held up the standard of black women’s sacred worth, their “men will come to it;



they cannot help themselves.” She continued, “It is women who rule the world – or who can rule it, always, if only they will stand together.”<sup>27</sup>

Hammond mentioned Paine College briefly in *In Black and White*. In some respects, she seems to advocate for white control of Paine. She assured the reader that “the denomination was officially committed to it as a proper work for white Christians to undertake; Southern white college men and women have officered it from the first.” Yet she also never mentioned industrial education, saying instead that Paine was established “for the training of Negro preachers, teachers, and other leaders for the race.” She later remarked that the “authorities” at Paine College are working to convince the church to establish a “training school for Negro missionaries and social workers who may be employed by the whites as well as by coloured churches in all these forms of cooperative effort.”<sup>28</sup> Though not explicit, Hammond seemed to move beyond the more conservative views that industrial education was the right way for blacks, a means to learn a trade and proper deportment and character. She instead describes their potential as spiritual leaders and reformers in their own right – a far cry from the potential she saw in Paine students in her earlier writings.

Less than a year after Lily published *In Black and White*, the MECS reassigned John, removing him from his post at Paine. Some commentators, both at the time and the years since, attributed the firing to the radical nature of Lily’s views and publications. But John had had his own conflicts with the MECS. The Methodist Bishop who oversaw Paine and played an instrumental role in John’s firing, Warren Candler, was a steadfast traditional evangelical with a great deal of suspicion of the liberal/social gospel branch of the church in which he grouped the Hammonds. Though a long-time supporter of Paine College, he vocally disapproved of many

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<sup>27</sup> Hammond and Green, 95–104.

<sup>28</sup> Hammond and Green, 85, 91.

progressive movements; though he supported prohibition, he refused to cooperate with the WCTU because of its support for woman's suffrage. He actively worked to find a different posting for John, away from Paine, and he resigned as a member of the board of trustees while John was president, though he had served for thirty years. He without doubt disapproved of the more radical approach to race relations taken by Lily Hammond. But biographer Elna Green argues that the evidence does not support the conclusion that Lily's "progressive racial views" forced the Hammonds to leave. It was more likely due to the school's finances; John was just the first of several presidents who left Paine after a short tenure, unable to solve the problems surrounding Paine's growing debt.<sup>29</sup>

The publication of *In Black and White* was an important development, both for Lily Hammond and the WMC leadership who read her work. Importantly, *In Black and White* was a shift for Hammond from a paternalist approach to race relations to a more progressive embrace of interracialism. Hammond wrote of the necessity of getting to know black people beyond the stereotypes white southerners had developed about them. She described how southerners viewed blacks as "dirty, untruthful, and immoral...by nature dishonest," and she admitted this was true of some. But she refused to accept the paternalist belief that this was an innate inadequacy, instead asking, "But have we ever asked ourselves why? Have we gone into their homes to find what drives them? Do we know anything of the wants in their lives?" Hammond specifically condemned blaming the poor for their own problems and argued that the church would have no luck saving people's souls if they did not first meet their physical needs. She wrote, "We have thrown on the poor, and on God's grace, responsibility for the results of our own sins of neglect: and until the churches shoulder their share of responsibility for community conditions which

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<sup>29</sup> Hammond and Green, xxxiv–xxxv, n. 121 pg. li.

defy the Bible law of human brotherhood here and now, I do not believe they will make any great headway, in the world outside their borders, in preaching the fatherhood of God or salvation for the world to come.”<sup>30</sup>

Clearly a great deal had changed for Hammond between publishing “A Southern View of the Negro” in 1903 and publishing the much more radical *In Black and White* in 1914. Lily spent several of those intervening year at Paine College, where the difficulties the Hammonds faced “hardened” Lily’s views on racial reform. According to her biographer, “Her optimism about the potential for the white South to make rapid advancement on racial justice faded some. Her optimism about the potential for goodwill to prevail without legislative support also dimmed. Possibly, too, her optimism about the central role of the church in race relations faded, as she increasingly turned to secular organizations such as the NAACP and the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC).”<sup>31</sup>

Hammond was disenchanted by the church’s lack of progress, and she was outspoken about her belief that the church alone could not solve race issues. In *In Black and White*, Hammond wrote, “It is puzzling that the local churches, of all denominations, all over the South, should fail as they do in leadership in this matter.” She doubted if, in any state, “a dozen ministers could be found, in all denominations put together, who make a practice of preaching, even once in two or three years, about race relations, or our duty to our black poor, or the connection between the Negro quarters of our cities and the interests of the kingdom of God.” Her disappointment with the church caused her to look elsewhere for the next developments in racial reform, a watershed moment in the development of Methodist women’s race work. In her 1917 booklet *Southern Women and Racial Adjustment*, Hammond wrote, the “initial inspiration

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<sup>30</sup> Hammond and Green, 57, 60.

<sup>31</sup> Hammond and Green, xxxv.

has come from the churches and church teaching, but it is working out, in the main, through organizations outside the church.”<sup>32</sup> Hammond retained her ties to the WMC, but she increasingly worked with secular and ecumenical organizations, such as the Southern Sociological Congress, NAACP, and the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. Other WMC leaders followed suit.

The publication of *In Black and White* is an important signpost in the WMC’s move towards interracialism, but it also predicted the limits to what white women would accept. Hammond encouraged her readers to cooperate with black leaders, and she noted several institutions, including the WMC, who had done just that. However, she was unable, at least in this book, to completely decenter whites from these relationships. Except for some notable exceptions, Hammond wrote, “many of even the well-educated Negroes are yet unequal to the task of achieving unaided the spiritual emancipation of their people.” She continued, “These need the forming and inspiring touch of educated whites.”<sup>33</sup> Like Hammond, other WMC leaders saw the potential in working with organizations outside of the church in order to advance race issues, as well as the possible value of working more directly with black leaders. But also like Hammond, these leaders would not cede control to the black leaders who they were ostensibly trying to work with.

This tension between working with black women while still wanting to tell them what to do is seen clearly in the development of the CIC women’s department. In October 1920, Carrie Parks Johnson, a white Methodist activist, stood before an audience of ecumenical white women from across the South. These women had gathered in Memphis to test the waters of a woman’s arm of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. Johnson was an executive committee

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<sup>32</sup> Hammond and Green, 94–95, 142.

<sup>33</sup> Hammond and Green, 92.

member of the WMC, and she had instigated this Memphis meeting. At this meeting, Johnson read aloud a statement prepared by a caucus of black women who had gathered at the National Association of Colored Women conference at Tuskegee Institute that July. The statement urged the white women to take action on a broad range of issues, including the working conditions of domestic servants, child welfare, transportation, education, lynching, and the treatment of blacks in the white press.

This gathering, and the events that led up to it, encapsulate the many different strands and difficulties surrounding race work during this time – the urge to look beyond the confines of the Methodist church for action, the tension between white control and black agency, and the need to create a more nuanced, informed agenda for racial reform. In reading this statement, Johnson presented an agenda for the CIC women that had been written by black women. However, the statement Johnson read had been altered, without the black writers' knowledge or approval. Johnson removed a plank on black suffrage, toned down considerably the condemnation of lynching, and omitted a preamble that demanded for black women "all the privileges and rights granted to American womanhood." This agenda for CIC women – developed by black women but modified by white women – is indicative of the complex relationship between black and white women working together for civil rights in which white women wanted to maintain control. It also demonstrates the ways in which WMC work with race issues transformed in 1920, as a series of momentous events leading up to and including the October conference shifted Methodist women's work with race further towards interracialism.

Hammond's writings shored up Methodist women's growing beliefs that white women alone could change the trajectory of southern blacks' lives, an important background to the events that transpired in 1920. Methodist women largely agreed with their southern

contemporaries on the present realities of blacks' condition, but they disagreed on what was possible for blacks in the future. The *possibility* of progress was key to their messaging. They pointed to successful blacks, as they defined success, as examples of what the race could achieve – with white women's help. Hammond directed the Southern Publicity Committee, which gathered and distributed news about black achievements. But in many respects, this attitude took away black agency. Though some leaders acknowledged that blacks might be more effective workers among their race than whites, those same leaders still advocated an approach that centered white aid. In 1915, the WMC encouraged its members to help black women form missionary societies of their own, but with the added reminder that it was their members' "duty to act as counselor and advisor to the colored women."<sup>34</sup>

White Methodist women may have wanted to deny black women their agency, but that does not mean they were successful. As historian Mary Frederickson has shown, black women were very adept at shaping white women's efforts through the process of transformation. Women's societies in the CME had existed since the 1890s, but in 1918 the CME General Conference approved an expanded Woman's Connectional Missionary Council. The next year, the MECS women reported that, "A constitution and by-laws for a missionary society, prepared by Mrs. H. R. Steel at the request of the women of the CME Church was approved by the committee." From the outset of their more formal organization, the CME's Woman's Missionary Council strategically made use of the white women's willingness to help. The CME did not need the white women to write their bylaws, and they certainly did not need them approved by their committee. But by involving the MECS in this process, the CME paved the way for future assistance from the white women.

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<sup>34</sup> "Fifth Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council" (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1915), 403; McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 87–100.

In that same report, Mrs. H. R. Steele described attending the first annual meeting of the Woman's Missionary Council of the CME. She noted that conference-level officers each paid the expenses for one delegate from their state. She described the reaction of the black delegates, writing, "Quite a few of the delegates said they had come to the meeting strengthened by the prayers of the women of our Conference societies. These women are looking to us for cooperation in the great work they have undertaken. They need our prayers and practical help until their work has been put on a permanent basis."<sup>35</sup> Practical assistance was often met with thanks and a push to continue or further that help.

In April 1920, just six months before Johnson would address the gathering of white women in Memphis, William Alexander gave a special address to the WMC annual session. Alexander, a young Methodist minister who had founded the CIC just a year prior, spoke "of the need of Christianizing the relations between the white and black people of this land." Alexander had also served on the interracial board of the Nashville Bethlehem Center, the WMC's first community center serving a black community. Together with the WMC president, Belle Bennett, Alexander called on the women to progress beyond their sporadic work in the black community, moving from settlement houses and schools as charitable work for the "weaker race" to cooperative projects with black women on both the local and regional level. Alexander's speech brought about "a pledge from the body and finally from almost every one present to do her best to bring about a better understanding between the races," and Sara Estelle Haskin put forward a motion to create a commission that would "study the whole question of race relationships, the needs of Negro women and children, and methods of cooperation by which better conditions can

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<sup>35</sup> "Ninth Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council," 55, 130.

be brought about.” Mary DeBardeleben seconded her motion, and Carrie Parks Johnson was made the chair.<sup>36</sup>

The CIC was a vehicle of white liberalism in the South, one that moved cautiously against the entrenched system of segregation and inequality. According to historian Patricia Sullivan, the CIC “aimed to provide an organizational structure to promote dialogue and interaction among black and white community leaders as the essential first step to constructive race relations...the group avoided all discussion of ultimate goals; its primary aim was to move beyond mutual ignorance.” Alexander described his organization as attempting to “substitute reason for force” and that it encouraged white and black citizens to work together. He said, “Heretofore, the southern custom had been for white folks to decide what they wanted and tell the Negroes to do it, with the ever-present assumption that the white man would use force if necessary.” But in the founding of the women’s arm of the CIC, black women were less interested in the easing of tensions and establishing better racial relationships as they were in practical solutions to urgent problems facing black communities. Despite Alexander’s heady words about black and white cooperation, black women’s voices were still oppressed so as to fit white women’s expectations.

Nonetheless, the black women who attended the Memphis conference in 1920 successfully established an agenda for the women’s division of the CIC that addressed real issues.<sup>37</sup> To understand how this was possible, one can again employ the insight of historian Mary E. Frederickson. The process of transformation was vital to the success of the Memphis

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<sup>36</sup> Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry*, 86–87; “Tenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 29; “Eleventh Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1921).

<sup>37</sup> Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 32; Wilma Dykeman and James Stokely, *Seeds of Southern Change: The Life of Will Alexander*, The Norton Library (New York: Norton, 1976), 65.



conference in 1920. Black women engaged in the process on a grand scale with results that reverberated across the institution.

Lugenia Burns Hope, a prominent African American leader in the South, learned of the new WMC commission from Will Alexander. Hope had created the Neighborhood Union in Atlanta in 1906, which provided a wide range of services to the black community. As the wife of John Hope, president of Morehouse College, Hope was well connected and influential. She invited Lily Hammond, Carrie Parks Johnson, and Sara Estelle Haskin, who had served as supervisor of the Nashville Bethlehem House, to attend the biennial conference of the National Association of Colored Women at Tuskegee Institute in July 1920. The conference was to be followed by a meeting between the white women and Hope's southern coworkers in the home of Margaret Washington, the wife of Booker T. Washington. At the recommendation of Alexander, Haskin and Johnson accepted. Historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall described these meetings, writing, "When they arrived, Johnson and Haskin were offered segregated housing and dining facilities...But when they appeared at the first session of the NACW conference, they were startled to find themselves treated simply as members of the group rather than honored white guests." At the private meeting following the NACW conference, the small group of black women spoke frankly to Johnson and Haskin about their concerns. Despite initial awkwardness and mutual distrust, Hope was candid: "Women, we can achieve nothing today unless you...who have met us are willing to help us find a place in American life where we can be unashamed and unafraid."<sup>38</sup> Johnson and Haskin asked the women to write a statement they could take back with them, saying "Now we know that these things exist, but we do not know what to do about

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<sup>38</sup> Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry*, 80, 86–89; Hammond and Green, *In Black and White*, xxxix.

them...Will you recommend things that may aid us in this work?" It was this statement that Johnson altered and read aloud in Memphis.<sup>39</sup>

Johnson and Haskin's experience with Lugenia Hope and the other black women at the NACW was vital to their efforts to create a women's department of the CIC. Johnson and Haskin returned from the conference determined to take action, and they pressured Will Alexander to explore the possibility of a women's arm of the CIC. In response, Alexander convinced the CIC to sponsor a southern women's conference in Memphis, Tennessee on October 6-7, 1920. The organizers gave little information to the women they invited, a cross-section of the major Protestant denominations, the women's clubs, and the YWCA. Only during the opening session, when Johnson and Haskin shared their experience at the conference at Tuskegee, did they explain that three black women would address the white audience over the next day and a half. They informed the audience that those who objected could leave before the afternoon session.

There was only one African American speaker that afternoon, Margaret Murray Washington. Washington had played an important role in local organizing and the expansion of the black women's club movement. Like her husband Booker T. Washington, Margaret Washington embraced accommodation, "combining an assertion of black cultural achievements and racial pride with a conciliatory stance toward whites." In her address to the white women, Washington focused on the black home, recounting the problems in black education and for black women who worked in white homes. According to Jacqueline Dowd Hall, Washington "operated as a mediator between the [more progressive black speakers] and the white leadership and as a brake on their self-assertion and militancy." She was the perfect candidate to open the series of black speakers, as her ideas would be familiar and palatable to the white audience.

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<sup>39</sup> Dykeman and Stokely, *Seeds of Southern Change*, 90.

On the second day of the conference, Elizabeth Ross Haynes addressed the group. She spoke more directly than Washington, though still couching her directives in acquiescence. Earlier in the meeting, a white participant had stated she “believed in segregation.” Haynes acknowledged this comment, though she did not endorse it, and followed it by describing “some of the daily humiliations of life under Jim Crow.” She ended her speech with a story of Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech.

Haynes was followed by Charlotte Hawkins Brown, a well-educated black activist who had founded a preparatory school in North Carolina with the aid of northeastern philanthropists. Of the three speakers, Brown was the most forthright. During her trip to Memphis, a crowd of angry white men forced her to leave the Pullman sleeping berth and enter a Jim Crow day coach. When she arrived in Memphis, she was visibly angry, and Johnson and Haskin purposefully kept her off the program for the first day. But Brown recounted this story in her speech on the second day, and she was blunt in her condemnation, telling the audience, “The shame of the whole affair was that southern white women passing for Christians were on that very car” headed to the Memphis meeting. Brown seemed to echo the very challenge Hammond had included in *In Black and White*, that white women should see black women as “women first.” She followed this story by challenging southern white women to address the issue of lynching as well as the myth of the promiscuous black woman. Her final statement practically flipped the script of the process of transformation. Instead of expressing an appeal through praise, she did so through warning, saying, “I know that if you are Christian women, that in the final analysis you are going to have to reach out for the same hand that I am reaching out for but I know that the dear Lord will not

receive it if you are crushing me beneath your feet.”<sup>40</sup> At the end of her speech, the white audience rose to their feet and spontaneously broke into a Christian hymn of solidarity.

The three black speakers at the CIC women’s conference engaged in the process of transformation on a grand scale. By starting with Washington, the accommodationist, the speakers eased their audience into the more radical ideas espoused by Haynes and Brown. And the white organizers aided in this process. Hoping to avoid controversy, they purposefully chose Washington to open the series, as the least objectionable for the white audience. They kept Brown off the first day’s program, concerned, perhaps, that her righteous anger regarding her abysmal treatment on the train would pervade her speech in a manner unacceptable to the women. But in the end, the white audience responded with overwhelming positivity. Jacqueline Dowd Hall argues that the white audience responded this way because “proud and articulate black women exhorted passionately...in acceptable generalities and in the language of a shared religious tradition.” However, I would argue that these “acceptable generalities” became progressively less general as the speeches continued. The application of Frederickson’s theory to this event demonstrates how the very methods white women used to try and suppress black women could actually work in the black women’s favor. This meeting, which Hall calls a “paradigm” for interracial meetings for a decade, indicates that collaboration between black and white women required the strategic and ongoing negotiation of racial and power dynamics.

Despite the positive reaction of the white delegates to the black speakers, the altered statement cast a long shadow. When Johnson moved to publish her version of the statement, the black women protested. Lugenia Hope convinced Johnson to delay publication, and she reconvened the original Tuskegee participants so that they could reaffirm their commitment to

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<sup>40</sup> Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry*, 90–95; Hammond and Green, *In Black and White*, 103.

the original statement. The white and black women negotiated for months, until finally a compromise statement was formed. But Johnson ultimately decided to drop the entire thing and informed the black women the statement would not be printed. In letters to her colleagues, Hope expressed her frustration with the white women's inability or unwillingness to embrace true racial equality. In a letter to a colleague, Hope wrote, "It is difficult for me to understand why my white sisters so strenuously object to this expression of colored women as put forth in the discarded preamble...I therefore cannot [*sic*] understand why this clause should be cut out, since this is the Negro woman's viewpoint, and that is what you asked us for, our point of view not the White women's point of view." White women, afraid of backlash or perhaps the loss of their own power, muted the voices of black women. But despite the suppression of important planks, black women did indeed set the agenda for the women of the CIC, pushing them towards key issues and making bold statements about systemic inequality.

The WMC leaders certainly did not give equal weight to the opinions of black women. However, this was still a momentous event in the development of Methodist women's work, because for the first time they agreed to collaborate with black women directly, both in setting an agenda and executing the work. The establishment of the CIC – and the Methodist women's involvement in it – is indicative of a larger shift for progressive reformers of this era, from a paternalistic approach to reform to an interracial one. According to historian William Link, "the organization of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation and the popularity of interracialism among white liberals revealed subtle but significant attitudinal changes." After World War I, black leaders became more outspoken in their criticism of paternalism, exploding white notions of black contentment and docility. The black women who spoke at the Memphis meeting in 1920 embraced this frank talk. William Alexander considered Charlotte Hawkins Brown's speech at

that meeting to be the deciding factor for white women to embrace the interracialist cause.

Interracialism gave black reformers the opportunity to educate whites about the black community and to more directly influence the actions white leaders took. These changes in attitude “suggest a larger reorientation in which older assumptions about black inadequacy and white control were evaporating.”<sup>41</sup>

As an important player in bringing white women to the table at the Memphis conference, Carrie Parks Johnson was greatly influenced by interracialism, which in turn influenced the entire WMC as she took the helm of race work. She was employed as the chair of the WMC Commission on Race Relations from 1921 to 1926, while she also acted as the director of Woman’s Work for the CIC and oversaw the Woman’s General Committee. She used her influence to secure Methodist support for the CIC, and she used CIC resources for her Methodist work. Johnson drew on the ideas espoused by Lily Hammond, advocating for increased personal contact between white women and African American women as a means to change white attitudes. Historian Alice Knotts notes that the interracial projects of the 1920s “usually involved minimal interracial communication and often supported segregation” but that the “variety of projects undertaken and their adaptation to the local situation indicate that African American women were suggesting to white women avenues for interracial activities.” WMC chapters took on interracial work at an astounding pace: 110 auxiliary interracial committees in 1922, 445 in 1923, and 571 in 1924.<sup>42</sup>

Hammond still contributed to WMC race work in the 1920s, and she continued to write for WMC publications. Her argument that poverty was the root cause of social problems in the

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<sup>41</sup> Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, 262, 265.

<sup>42</sup> Knotts, *Fellowship of Love*, 54–55.

South was central to Methodist women's attitudes toward race problems. Even prior to their more enthusiastic work in the 1920s, the women "began to appreciate the fact that black people were victims of the environment in which they lived." According to historian John McDowell, the women widely held a view "that the poverty, ignorance, and immorality that they perceived as widespread among blacks could be largely cured with a good dose of social improvements, education, and gospel." And in classic Methodist fashion, the WMC supported efforts to study and understand the condition of blacks, supporting broad investigations of the legal and social situation. They also encouraged chapters to undertake local studies of the situation in their own communities, with the intention of finding avenues to support reform.

Lily Hammond probably went further than any other WMC leader in identifying systemic problems for black poverty. Hammond condemned institutions for the role they played in corrupting and discriminating against black people. She criticized the "privileged" for having broadened sympathies toward blacks, while not learning "about slums, or a minimum wage, or mending criminals instead of manufacturing them, or the abolition of poverty, or the connection between under-nourishment and the poorhouse." She pointed to Jim Crow train cars as an example of "our failure to see under their black skin a humanity as dear to justice and to God as our own." Hammond lamented that a black customer would pay the same fare as her but receive in return far inferior conditions. Even in cases where the black and white cars were "equal" when they were originally built, Hammond pointed out that constant neglect of the black cars by the company rendered them filthy. Though Hammond gave a few examples of a black person riding in a white car without incident (for instance, a young black girl of a "finer class" who could not abide the black miscreants in the black train car), she was not advocating for integration of the cars. Instead, Hammond insisted that black people deserved the same level of cleanliness as

white people. “Why should this other [black] woman, who loves cleanliness as much as I do,” Hammond asked, “and who is quite as willing to pay for it, be forced to travel in that disgusting filth?” Hammond’s solution to this issue was a startling condemnation of both white fare-buyers and the Pullman company:

But if the railroads claim that they really cannot provide decent day coaches and comfortable sleeping accommodations for Negroes, a commission should be appointed to look into the matter: and if their contention proved just, fares for everybody should be raised by law to a point which would allow the roads to maintain standards of comfort and decency for all their passengers. We cannot afford, as a people, to let the Negroes pay for our cheap fares: for that is just what it amounts to when the railroad takes the same amount of money from both of us, and gives us better accommodations than it can afford to give them. We are not paying for all we can get in our day coaches, evidently; and if the Negro isn’t footing the bill for the deficit, who is? As for the Pullman company, if half the published tales of its dividends be true, it could furnish cars for Negroes and pay its employees a living wage, and yet be in no danger of bankruptcy. Public utilities should be subject to public control.<sup>43</sup>

Hammond wrote extensively of the American prison system for blacks, criticizing the state of prisons, particularly for those not yet convicted. “The accommodations provided for unconvicted American citizens violate the laws of decency and health in regard to the commonest physical needs,” Hammond wrote, “There is no privacy, no cleanliness. Everything in his surroundings combines to brand on the offender’s consciousness the fact that he is no longer regarded as a being with human rights, reversionary or otherwise. His relation to life is purely that of the committer of a crime.” She criticized the gang system, especially that it cheated prisoners out of earnings they were owed. She argued that underage offenders should be given special care, to understand not just what they did but why, and she spoke sharply about the severity of sentences for minors: “What had any of these boys, white or black, done, in their isolation, their ignorance, their stunted moral growth, unfriended, untaught— what had they done

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<sup>43</sup> Hammond and Green, *In Black and White*, 15, 30–35.



which gave society the right to seize their poor, starved lives and break and poison them in its foul prisons beyond hope of recovery for all time? Even if we had the right, what good does it do?” Hammond called for reform to these systems across the South.<sup>44</sup>

Hammond also warned of the futility of pursuing prohibition over all other solutions. The WMC had actively supported prohibition efforts since its beginnings. This was a popular issue for Methodist women at all levels of the society. Like other reformers, the women believed alcohol was the root cause of many pernicious evils that affected the entire family and perpetuated sexual immorality and violent crime. Hammond, however, cautioned her readers that prohibition would merely create a vacuum for other vices. She lamented “the Negro’s propensity for drink” and “love of liquor,” but she also acknowledged that alcohol was one of the sole sources of recreation for the poor, both black and white. Six years before the passage of the eighteenth amendment, Hammond wrote in *In Black and White*,

Prohibition is good as far as it goes, even though in our cities it does not go at all. But it will never, by itself, do very much more than just slick life up on the outside. It is a purely negative measure, a gigantic Thou shalt not...Temperance measures, to be effective, must be constructive: they must offer something to take the place of what they have driven out...What is there in the South that offers clean amusement, clean play, to Negroes young or old?

Hammond was not arguing against prohibition as a cause; she detailed the effects when white and black men became “slaves of drink.” But she identified alcohol as a symptom of a more systemic problem, a lack of recreation and diversion for the poorer classes and, more broadly, a reluctance on the part of whites to spend tax dollars on black needs. “When we provide for the human needs of the weakest,” Hammond wrote, “we come not upon sacrifice, but on more

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<sup>44</sup> Hammond and Green, 71–74.

abundant life for all. For we really are brethren, all of us, and the satisfied need of those who lack the strength and prosperity of all.”<sup>45</sup>

The WMC largely followed Hammond’s lead on the shift to interracialism over paternalism, even if they did not go so far as to embrace some of Hammond’s most radical views. Methodist women were willing to follow Hammond in the fight to improve the lives of black southerners. They supported the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching. They spoke out against the unequal financial support for black schools. They supported settlement houses, black colleges, and vocational training. They were persuaded that blacks were the victims of circumstance. They dutifully studied conditions of blacks in their communities.<sup>46</sup>

But for Methodist women to be effective in executing racial reform, their studies of conditions had to produce action. And here is where the WMC work largely stalled. Though leadership talked a great deal about how poverty was the root causes of black problems, they were either unable or unwilling to crystallize a broad understanding of economic inequality and oppression. The literature they disbursed to help members deal with these topics focused largely on race relations and home keeping. If the women could convince white southerners to treat blacks with more respect, a number of their problems would be curtailed. If black women could be taught how to keep a clean and pleasant home, both black men and children would benefit. The WMC limited itself to the issue of living conditions and race relations, avoiding the issue of economic justice for African Americans almost entirely.

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<sup>45</sup> McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 44–45; Hammond and Green, *In Black and White*, 65–67.

<sup>46</sup> Sara Estelle Haskin, “An Untouched Area of Life” (October 1926), 3–4, *Adult Year Book 1926-1927*, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

In one essay published for WMC members, Sara Estelle Haskin recounted the “almost hilarious joy” with which the church sent missionaries to Africa while simultaneously upholding prejudice at home. The very opportunities the church wished to extend to Africans, Haskin argued, were those the church would keep from African Americans. The idea that God made one race superior to another makes “God an aristocrat” and flies in the face of the inherent democracy of Christianity.<sup>47</sup> Haskin suggests applying the “Golden Rule” in order to solve the issue of racial prejudice, arguing that the overcoming of prejudice will allow African Americans to prosper. She writes, “An appreciation on the part of the white race of the characteristic talents of the negro and a faith in the possibility of his future...will help marvelously in solving the problem of race integrity.”<sup>48</sup> In an essay for the WMC in 1924, Carrie Parks Johnson wrote, “With an imposed inheritance of a paternalistic attitude for the weak and helpless Negro suddenly thrown upon his own resources in the South in 1865, we have sought to hold him [through] his period of childhood, adolescence, and even manhood to do our bidding, to serve our will, and to practically efface himself as a factor in community and national life.” Johnson instead encouraged WMC members to respect African Americans in their own right and advocate for their right to the “full protection of the law of the land” and access to every opportunity which “civilization and Christianity offer.” “Every man made in the image of God,” Johnson argues, “is a person whom God respects.”<sup>49</sup>

WMC publications reveal they viewed white poverty as structural and black poverty as cultural. In 1924, the WMC told its members that attempts by mills and volunteer organizations

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<sup>47</sup> Sara Estelle Haskin, “Africa at Home. A Problem of Christian Love and Common Justice,” May 1917, 3, *Adult Year Book 1915-1917*, Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

<sup>48</sup> Haskin 4.

<sup>49</sup> Mrs. Luke Johnson, “Observing New Attitudes from the Interracial Observatory,” March 1924, 2-3, *Adult Year Book 1924-1925*, Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

to provide white women workers with day nurseries and breaks to nurse their infants were not enough. The true issue was a lack of a living wage for women and men alike. WMC members were directed to advocate for women to have the “same pay for the same work done by men,” as well as the regulation of work hours and safety standards.<sup>50</sup> Yet Mary DeBardeleben’s article on the sisterhood of black and white women in September 1925 argued that the most effective way for *black* women to contribute to the economic needs of their farming families was to learn to keep house. DeBardeleben wrote, “The annual meeting at Tuskegee brings together more than 800 colored farmers whose farms range in extent from 10 to 900 acres. By fitting the colored girl and woman to maintain the home life on these farms according to the standards of right living, the association can make a most valuable contribution.”<sup>51</sup> Though the literature made clear that African American women often worked outside of the home, their solution was to help black women become better housekeepers, not raise their wages. This stands in stark contrast to the many articles that advocate for raising white women’s wages as a solution to their many problems.

The WMC often pointed out the issues facing African American communities in the South, which were much like those of rural and urban whites: lack of educational opportunities, poor living conditions, and the prevalence of preventable disease. However, time and again the assessment of issues facing whites and blacks diverged in one significant way: labor. A pamphlet published by Sara Estelle Haskin for members to read in their October 1926 meeting, on the state of African American life, never mentioned labor or economics. Compare that to the next month’s meeting topic, November’s “Untouched Areas of American Home Life,” which asked, “What is

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<sup>50</sup> Mrs. W. A. Newell, “The Children of Industrial Mothers,” December 1924, 6-7, Adult Year Book 1924-1925, Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

<sup>51</sup> Mary DeBardeleben, “Where Sisterhood Does Not End,” September 1925, 12, Adult Year Book 1924-1925, Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

the Woman's Missionary Council doing to rebuild the disadvantaged homes of America?"

Focused almost exclusively on the physical and moral conditions of white, lower-income homes, this publication gave the example of an imaginary but representative family. Imaginary church women visited a family who lived in a rundown home, the mother too exhausted by work to take care of the house. The mother, Ella, "worked out," and brought in barely enough money to supplement the income of her husband John Carr, who worked in the silk mills when he wasn't too drunk to do so. Their oldest daughter, Lillie Mae, worked in the mills for \$7 a week, but spent the entirety of her income on herself and was no help around the house. The church women spoke of other troubling observations: a younger son who skipped school and ran wild, the family's low church attendance, and Lillie Mae's pursuance of a "good time." The church women also lamented the high rent, charged by a member of their congregation, of \$4 a week. They conspired to send the landlord's wife on one of these "friendly visits," so that she could see what a "shack" the home was for such an exorbitant rent.<sup>52</sup>

The most interesting part of this imaginary scenario, however, is the assessment of John Carr, the erstwhile father. One church woman decries his drinking habits, pointing out that if he was not out of work half the time, his wife would not have to work. But her visiting partner points out, "I doubt if he could make enough even if he didn't drink. A great number of the mill hands don't make over fifteen dollars a week, and if they have to pay four dollars of that for rent, there would be only eleven for food, clothes, heat, light, and everything else for a family of five." The writer, Sallie Lewis Browne, asserts that this assessment, that the man is so poorly paid that the woman must work, is true in every community. Black men's wages are not mentioned, though Browne does briefly mention that many black women must work outside of the home.

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<sup>52</sup> Sallie Lewis Browne, "Untouched Areas of American Home Life" (November 1926), 3-4, *Adult Year Book 1926-1927*, Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

The WMC is making a clear argument: low wages directly contribute to the living conditions and moral standards of *white* homes. Browne doesn't mention specific solutions to the wage issue, such as a minimum wage law, but she does argue, "This is a matter on which the public conscience needs to be awakened. If the men are paid better wages, their wives will not need to work away from home. Neither would it be necessary for the children to leave school to go to work as soon as the law allows."<sup>53</sup> In an imaginary scenario created solely for the purpose of this pamphlet, the writer is careful to point out that a white man, even one with moral failings, deserves a living wage. Better wages would solve much of the family's problems. In the pamphlet on African American issues, the solution to almost the exact same problems is reduced to bettering race relations.

In contrast, Hammond made a pointed argument that adequate homes *and* good wages were crucial. Hammond's piece, "The Negro in Industry," published for the June meeting in 1920, focused on the impact white industrial leaders could have on access to education, recreation, and adequate living conditions for black workers and families. She pointed to the American Cast Iron Pipe Company outside of Birmingham as a shining example. The company was owned by John Joseph Eagan, an Atlanta philanthropist and social gospel adherent who had used an inheritance to buy the company. He implemented "Christian labor relations" in his factory. Progressive era historian William Link writes, "Observing what he claimed was the golden rule in business and labor practices, he implemented profit sharing, guaranteed employment, and extended medical and retirement benefits, and he constructed recreational facilities for his workers."<sup>54</sup> Hammond elaborated on the efforts Eagan went to to extend these opportunities to both white and black employees. Black workers were given the same wonderful

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<sup>53</sup> Browne, 5, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, 258.

facilities as white workers. “Both races are encouraged to own their homes,” Hammond wrote, “and the very attractive offer made by the company is identical for whites and blacks.” She sums up the state of wages by saying, “Equal pay is given for equal work.”<sup>55</sup> Hammond’s underlying argument is that if white employers would treat black employees with the same regard as they do whites, blacks could excel. She is certainly making a case that workers, both black and white, should be given access to adequate and fair housing, but she is also arguing that workers should be paid the same wages regardless of race.

Compare Hammond’s take on black labor to that of Mary DeBardeleben’s discussion of immigrant labor, published in the same year. In “Labor Reconstruction in America,” DeBardelben outlined the many problems for new immigrants, including working hours, wages, the right to organize, and living conditions. In plain language, she described the desperate conditions of dilapidated houses and the lack of sanitary drainage, plumbing, or garbage services in “foreign” areas of industrial towns. DeBardelben encouraged members to pressure business and city leaders to provide adequate housing, to persuade health facilities to actively reach immigrant workers, and to establish an information bureau in which workers could learn about their legal rights and how to invest their funds. She described how the idea of democracy had taken hold in industry, as workers demanded, “with more or less success, recognition and actual voice in industrial management.... But much remains to be done.”<sup>56</sup>

WMC leaders were quick to point out the failings of industry, identifying low wages, long working hours, and inadequate safety standards as the root of many of poor whites’ problems. And they often defended workers’ right to unionize and protest when these minimum

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<sup>55</sup> Mrs. L. H. Hammond, “The Negro in Industry,” June 1920, 4, Adult Year Book 1920-1921, Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

<sup>56</sup> Mary DeBardelben, “Labor Reconstruction in America,” March 1920, Adult Year Book 1920-1921, Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries.

requirements were not met. However, they could not or would not make the intuitive leap to identify these same issues as the root of the problems plaguing African Americans in the South. This separation was not unusual. Many labor organizations throughout the country ignored the plight of black workers and their families. But in the South, where poor whites and poor blacks often lived strikingly similar lives, some organizers and activists recognized that shared economic injustice.<sup>57</sup> Compared to other southerners concerned with labor issues, the WMC worked hard to keep the issue of white labor at the forefront of their members' minds while appearing to downplay the conditions of black labor and economics. Though always concerned with race relations, white prejudice against African Americans, and the state of black education and home life, the women of the WMC, Lily Hammond included, largely turned a blind eye to black labor in the South.

In this varied work with and for blacks, the white Methodist women continued to center themselves as the solution to race problems. Lily Hammond was convinced that white women were the key, and she wrote about this liberally in her publications. In his study of the WMC, John McDowell argues, "The women of Southern Methodism viewed human history as a progressive continuum. Their own white race had developed far along the scale...Blacks were also in this continuum, though...much lower on the scale." White women generally viewed the potential progression of blacks as positive. Whites were superior to blacks and necessary for their uplift not because of a biologically or racially superiority but because of a greater evolution. Lily Hammond certainly agreed with this. But the vital piece that McDowell misses is Hammond's argument – and increasing agreement amongst WMC women – that whites were

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<sup>57</sup> Erik Gellman and Jared Roll, *The Gospel of the Working Class: Labor's Southern Prophets in New Deal America*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Ralph E. Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885-1912*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 1991.



complicit in blacks' location on the continuum. Hammond had argued for many years that white people generally were largely the cause of race problems, whether it be race relations or the conditions under which blacks lived and worked. "Our slums are not the product of a race unrelated and incapable of development; they are *our* part of a world-wide morass where life capable of higher things is sucked under and destroyed," she wrote.<sup>58</sup>

Over time, other white Methodist women began to see the problem as that of whites as well. The issue of anti-lynching forced other Methodist women to heed Hammond's words in ways other issues had not. Lynching presented the WMC with the undeniable fact that white people were perpetrating violence against black people. Other progressive reformers criticized mob violence and lynching as damaging to the legal system yet also considered it a natural response to a supposed increase in black crime. Though certainly concerned with the illegality of lynching, the WMC seemed to realize something more was happening than vigilante justice. In a book put together for brand new auxiliaries to use in their first year, the WMC adapted the writings of Bertha Newell to direct new members on the issue of lynching:

I know a family, one of whom was lynched. Maybe there is such a family in your county. If so, look the people up. Learn the facts and the reactions: then *you* write a story. Don't dodge; don't evade; just tell the bald, dirty facts, *all* the facts. Think it over. What do you think about it? What would John Wesley think? What does Christ think? *We Methodists ought to get together on lynching*. None needs remain in uncertainty. Lo, Christ stands with uplifted, broken hands, and he whispers, 'Inasmuch! Inasmuch!'

After the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill failed in the Senate in 1922, the WMC published one of its most strongly worded resolutions, exclaiming that the WMC "do now demand of the authorities of the several States that they make good their claim proving their competency to abolish mob violence and lynching." The auxiliaries were told to take action. As with most issues, they were

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<sup>58</sup> Ralph Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885-1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 104; Hammond and Green, *In Black and White*, 43.

to study lynching in their own state, but in an unusual step for the WMC, they were also to “make the facts public through newspapers, pamphlets, and addresses.” The WMC also gave specific details as to what legislation was needed, including “provisions for the removal of officers who surrender prisoners to mobs, a State constabulary under the control of the Governor, and the assessment of a fine against the county where a lynching occurs, to be paid as damages to the family of the victim.” That last proposed legislation indicates a concern for the victims of lynching unmatched by many Progressive reformers of the era.<sup>59</sup>

The 1930s saw a significant level of inter-agency cooperation with a particular focus on anti-lynching. Auxiliaries were directed to collaborate with other religious and civic organizations to secure needed anti-lynching legislation. In the 1930s, Methodist women who championed the interracial movement held top leadership roles in the WMC, the Women’s Department of the CIC, and the ASWPL, including Jessie Daniel Ames, Bertha Newell, Estelle Haskin, and Louise Young, among others. The WMC not only supported the objectives of the ASWPL, it also provided a large, organized group of women who could help achieve those objectives. WMC leadership placed a focus on support of the ASWPL and anti-lynching at the local level, encouraging conference level societies to endorse the ASWPL and designate their conference superintendents of Christian Social Relations and representatives of Christian Citizenship and Law Observance as members of the state associations of ASWPL.<sup>60</sup>

Transfixed with the rest of the country by the Scottsboro case in 1931, in which nine black boys were accused of raping two white girls on a train, the WMC pressed on despite backlash from the public. Bertha Newell received letters condemning her defense of “criminal

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<sup>59</sup> Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, 59–61; Brown, “The Winsome Call,” 91; “Thirteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 168–69.

<sup>60</sup> Knotts, *Fellowship of Love*, 68; McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 96.

negro men, at the expense of innocent white girls” from the Women’s National Association for the Preservation of the White Race and the Women’s Georgia Committee for Law Enforcement. Jessie Daniel Ames spoke at the WMC annual meeting in 1933 on the “Prevention of Lynching.” The ASWPL had secured thousands of signatures for their pledge against lynching, largely with the help of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation which promoted the pledge at local, district, and conference meetings. Likewise, the Committee on Christian Social Relations directed its superintendents to present the pledge in all its conference, district, and zone meetings for signatures and to send their collected signatures to the Interracial Commission. They particularly focused on securing the signatures of sheriffs and other public officers.<sup>61</sup>

In the mid-1930s, the lock-step collaboration between the WMC and ASWPL started to crack. Bertha Newell spoke warmly of Methodist women’s efforts to prevent lynchings, writing, “The Church women are the main dependence for awakening the women of the South on the menace of lynching....the number of prevented lynchings [are] positive proof that both women and men who had signed the pledge against lynching were the factors that protected the accused from mobs and insisted that the law should by hindered.” But she also noted with dismay that the number of lynchings had risen in 1935 compared to 1934. This increase was reason enough for the WMC to break with Ames and the ASWPL on the issue of federal anti-lynching legislation. Ames believed that lynching was a cultural problem and could only be prevented by persuading southerners it was morally wrong. But the WMC firmly believed civil rights legislation could pave the way for moral action. In 1936, both the Committee on Christian Social Relations and the Committee on Interracial Cooperation endorsed the Costigan-Wagner Anti-Lynching Bill as “representative of the nation’s responsibility in the protection of citizens and in the maintenance

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<sup>61</sup> Knotts, *Fellowship of Love*, 74; “Twenty Third Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 23, 107, 127; “Twenty Sixth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 142.

of peace and order.” Bertha Newell sent a letter to the superintendent of every auxiliary in the WMC urging them to “see their respective members of Congress in behalf of the Costigan-Wagner Bill before their return to Washington.” When a similar bill, the Dyer Anti-lynching Bill, was close to a vote in 1938 but was blocked by a few southern senators using the filibuster, the WMC went so far as to publish a Joint Affirmation between the Committee on Citizenship and Law Observance and the Committee on Interracial Cooperation : “We wish to go on record in the expression of a strong disapproval of the recent filibuster in the United States Senate, whereby action on the Anti-Lynching Bill was blocked. By this method a small minority was able to prevent the democratic processes for which our nation stands.” However, despite these differences on federal legislation, the WMC continued to work with the ASWPL on state legislation and mandatory change of venue for the accused.<sup>62</sup>

Anti-lynching captured the attention of local WMC auxiliaries at a level not previously seen on other race issues. Local auxiliaries reported their work in great detail, an anomaly unto itself considering how often superintendents complained about auxiliaries failing to report adequately. The Committee on Christian Social Relations reported:

Anti-lynching activities have been in general like these which we take from one Superintendent's quarterly reports: "State-wide project to secure signature of every sheriff to anti-lynch pledge. Campaigned for more signatures to pledge. Made talks before Young Peoples' Groups. Presented problem of lynching to other women's organizations. Made thorough study of 'Why We Lynch.' Wrote commendatory articles to officers who had prevented lynchings. Worked for anti-lynching legislation. Kept informed on current articles in magazines and daily press on lynching."

There are likely many reasons WMC members embraced the anti-lynching campaign with such fervor: the undeniable moral obligation, the prodding of black women (as in the CIC agenda), and the attractiveness of an interracial project that fit their limited definition of what interracial

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<sup>62</sup> “Twenty Sixth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 124, 142, 150; “Twenty Eighth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 163; Knotts, *Fellowship of Love*, 76.

activity should be. Yet anti-lynching also laid at the heart of “the intersection of race and the traditionally feminine category of morality.” According to William Link, this special purview for women allowed them to carry on their work given the constraints of the limits placed on them “both inside and outside the CIC.”<sup>63</sup>

But the 1930s saw a zeal among Methodist women for racial reform more generally. The WMC focused vigorously on black public schools, voting rights, and the conditions for black domestic workers. WMC leadership pointedly asked members to consider the working conditions and wages of domestic workers in their own communities. “Have we become calloused to exploitation which is incidental to our comfort?” Thelma Stevens, then the Council Superintendent of Christian Social Relations asked, “Would a survey of working conditions of domestic employees of your church members justify your conclusion?” Stevens also directed auxiliaries to promote the Federal Aid Bill in expectation of its vote in Congress in that it would provide federal funds for black and white schools in rural communities. The Committee on Interracial Cooperation advocated for investigation into voting rights for the first time in 1934. They encouraged local auxiliaries to study white primaries in their home communities “to find out to what extent the right of voting in primaries is limited to white citizens” and to take account of how this restrictive voting affected effective participation in government by “responsible Negro citizens.” In 1920, Carrie Parks Johnson had found a plank on black suffrage so divisive that she had removed it from the CIC agenda before reading it aloud to the gathered women. Much had changed in the intervening fourteen years.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> “Twenty Eighth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 144; Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, 255.

<sup>64</sup> Thelma Stevens, “To Auxiliary Superintendents of Christian Social Relations,” Second Quarter 1939, 4–5, *Adult Yearbooks 1933-1939, Records of the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries*; Stevens, “To Auxiliary Superintendents of Christian Social Relations,” First Quarter 1939, 2; “Twenty Fourth Annual Report of

The 1930s also brought black and white women together in Christian Leadership Schools, an initiative started in the late 1920s in which black and white women lived and studied together for a week. This was the natural culmination of interracialism and black agency through the process of transformation. The control was clearly in the hands of white women. Leaders of the WMC did most of the teaching, and white women often sponsored a black woman to attend. In 1928, the MECS WMC Committee on Social Service hosted two such institutes for women in the CME, one at Paine College in Georgia and the other at Mississippi Industrial Institute, in which members learned of mission study and organization, home making, and child care. Every woman attendee was financed by a white auxiliary, usually that of her local community. Bertha Newell, reported, “Your Superintendent has urged these auxiliaries to follow up this friendly service by keeping in touch with the women, thus sent, in ways that would promote interracial helpfulness. The white instructors have received many letters from them, asking for further help in their local Church problems, these indications and the deep appreciation point the way to a need for further cooperation with the women of our sister Methodist Colored Churches.”<sup>65</sup> This brief incident showcases both the changing tides of Methodist women’s approach to interracial work and the role of black women in pushing them to do so. Historian Alice Knotts notes, “The process of supporting a local African American delegate to attend these schools, then studying community needs with her and her associates, and gradually working together on local projects linked women across racial lines in Christian service.” It is not difficult to imagine that these letters may have followed up their “deep appreciation” with directives to continue or even expand such support and work.<sup>66</sup>

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the Woman’s Missionary Council” (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1934), 123.

<sup>65</sup> “Nineteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 115–16.

<sup>66</sup> Knotts, *Fellowship of Love*, 81.

In the 1930s, talks regarding Methodist reunification – a process that had started in 1916 – finally garnered results. The northern Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church (MPC), a small congregationalist branch of Methodism, negotiated terms for a united Methodist church. The central sticking point was over issues of race. Both the MEC and the MPC had substantial numbers of black churches in their denominations, and for many years the MECS refused to consider unification if it meant accepting nearly 326,000 black church members. Church leaders finally found compromise with a plan that segregated African American churches and pastors, annual conferences, and bishops from the rest of the white church.

The women of the WMC followed these talks with much interest. Many leaders were troubled by the approach to the race issue in the proposed plan. In 1935, the Executive Committee asked the Committee on Interracial Cooperation to study the racial aspects of the unification plan and report back. The Committee did so in 1937, and they were not pleased with what they had found. They explained the basic structure of the plan: five jurisdictional conferences that would be determined geographically and a sixth, separate conference that would house almost every black church entering the new church. The exception was in New England and twelve western states, where black churches would remain in the geographical annual conference composed mostly of white members. Presumably this was because these regions had very few black churches to begin with.<sup>67</sup>

The committee members were dismayed at this segregated church structure. They feared that keeping black and white churches in separate conferences would reduce even further the limited interaction between their members. In their report, the committee wrote, “Your

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<sup>67</sup> “Twenty Seventh Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 140; Knotts, *Fellowship of Love*, 85–86.

committee agrees that the plan is less than ideal, that it leaves much to be desired if the Methodist Church is fully to represent the Kingdom of God on earth. For Methodist churches in the same city to be related to each other only through a General Conference that meets once in four years seems consistent neither with Methodist connectionalism nor with Jesus' concern that 'they all may be one.'" The study report has an air of resignation, though, as if the members knew they could not really expect anything better. They acknowledged that this type of structural segregation already existed in the individual denominations. Though this would be a continuation of those practices, the new plan at least gave African Americans the right to elect their bishops and their delegates who would represent them at General Conference. "Is it not preferable," they asked, "to a nation-wide church with only white members?"<sup>68</sup>

The WMC's stance regarding the unification plan was unusual. They were one of the only white institutions, north or south, who stood with African American members in opposition to the plan. They certainly weren't advocating for desegregated churches. Their own institutions, such as the Scarritt Training School for Christian Workers which they owned and operated, did not admit black students. But they were willing to go further than almost anyone else in the church. Resigned to the fact that the church would likely move forward with their plan regardless of their opposition, the WMC instead asked what they could do with what they had.

We are suggesting that we become aware of the Negro congregations in our midst, especially of the M. E. connection, and that we seek to find ways of co-operating with them in the good work of the Kingdom. Let us seek to know their leaders in the missionary societies and let us ask our pastors to go with us in this adventure in Christian understanding. As we find work that we can best do together, let us undertake it together. Let us sometimes worship with one another. Those of us who have had such worship experiences will testify that they have brought us new visions of God and of his love for all men. Is not this the practical way to do our part toward building a great church in which men of all races and nations may find fellowship, in which we may all learn to build together the Kingdom of God?

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<sup>68</sup> "Twenty Seventh Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council," 142.



But the WMC was willing to criticize the church for its involvement in racism and that in itself was an anomaly.<sup>69</sup>

The WMC was outvoted at General Conference and unification as originally proposed took place in 1939. Methodist historian Morris Davis writes, “Thus the Methodist Church, one of the largest, wealthiest, and most powerful religious institutions in America, was born as a fully racialized Christian institution,” and the white women’s organization of the southern church were one of the few to protest it.<sup>70</sup> Though the merger meant the end of the WMC, it was not the end of women’s work in the Methodist Church. In 1939-1940, great work was done to merge the six different missionary boards and organizations of the three different denominations. The outcome was that women controlled the Woman’s Division of the Board of Missions and Church Extension and were guaranteed one-third membership of the Board. The Woman’s Division had three departments: Foreign Missions, Home Missions, and Christian Social Relations and Local Church Activities, which housed race work. 97 percent of the Woman’s Division’s budget and work was dedicated to foreign and home missions, making Christian Social Relations the smallest and least funded department.<sup>71</sup>

The women were undaunted. For the previous few years, the WMC had trained Thelma Stevens, head resident at the original Bethlehem House in Augusta, Georgia, to lead race work in the unified church. Stevens’s time at Augusta was formative, pushing for the center to act as community development rather than a settlement house charity. She wanted to work with black Methodist women rather than maintaining the customary “for the Negroes” model. She later said that, in their dealings with black Methodist women, whites “weren’t working on a horizontal

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<sup>69</sup> “Twenty Seventh Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council,” 143; Knotts, *Fellowship of Love*, 86.

<sup>70</sup> Davis, *The Methodist Unification*, 128.

<sup>71</sup> Knotts, *Fellowship of Love*, 91.

level.”<sup>72</sup> When she took over the Department of Christian Social Relations, Stevens was poised to lead southern Methodist women into a new era of race work. Over the previous decades, Methodist women had moved from paternalistic charity to an embrace of interracial work. They had embraced direct contact and collaboration with black women. In the 1930s, more and more local auxiliaries reported working closely with black women to solve common problems, seeking additional help to set up interracial programs for their communities. This consistent contact with black members of their communities weakened the women’s commitment to racial segregation. By the end of World War II, southern Methodist women had joined their northern sisters in calling for an end to segregation in major institutions. Their work was imperfect and cautious, but white southern women did more, went further, and challenged the church for racial equality more than possibly any other white institution in the American South.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era*, 2005, 85.

<sup>73</sup> Knotts, *Fellowship of Love*, 91; McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South*, 113.

## Conclusion

On November 28, 1940, representatives of the Woman's Division of Christian Service, of the newly formed Methodist Church, gathered in their first annual meeting, charged with setting the programs of their departments. Members read and voted on reports of foreign and home missions late into the night. Around 2:40 am the women still had not made it through all the reports, and one of the most conservative members of the organization, Mrs. W. Raymond Brown of New York, moved that they approve the report of the tiny Department of Christian Social Relations without hearing it. It was only the following morning that Brown and the other members learned exactly what program they had approved. The department's report centered its program around the "clarion call to Christians in the United States to combat all forms of intolerance against minorities." Though some members objected to this position, they had voted to approve it, and the Department of Christian Social Relations thrust Methodist women into a new fight for civil rights.<sup>1</sup>

The Department's "clarion call" was written by Thelma Stevens, a white southerner born to sharecroppers in central Mississippi who led the Department of Christian Social Relations and Local Church Activities until 1968. Stevens had been an important member of the WMC in the 1930s, particularly in race work. After training at the University of Southern Mississippi and at Scarritt College, Stevens acted as director of the Bethlehem Center in Augusta, Georgia for twelve years. In 1938, she took over as superintendent of the Bureau of Christian Social Relations from Bertha Newell, a logical stepping stone to director of the Department of Christian Social Relations in the Woman's Division. The tiny Department, third after home and foreign mission departments, commanded a miniscule budget of only \$15,000 to pay one executive staff

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<sup>1</sup> Knotts, *Fellowship of Love*, 140.

member and two secretaries, cover their office rent and travel expenses, and run its programs. Few anticipated the role the department would play in the civil rights movement, but Thelma Stevens was anxious to lead Methodist women into a new era of activism.

As southern women filled the ranks of the Woman's Division, they brought with them their decades of experience working on issues that others in their church opposed. Whether advocating for tenant farmers, immigrants, children, women, or African Americans – all people on the margins in southern society – WMC members pursued the work they believed would bring about the Kingdom of God. This context is the only way to understand why southern women entered the 1940s poised to lead a new national organization that would doggedly pursue the equality of all people. The thirty years of home mission work in the WMC had been a lesson to white, southern women in how society and government could fail the most vulnerable. After the merger of their southern denomination with two others in 1939, the new unified denomination fully crystalized for women how the church could do the same. Their fellow church members often stood against the issues and actions the women viewed as necessary to aid the poor and working class. But church members also opposed the full inclusion and equality of fellow church members, a fact that became especially apparent with the 1939 merger. The merger, hailed as a triumph for finally bringing together northern and southern Methodists who had split almost a century earlier over the issue of slavery, created a denomination that continued to value and prioritize the rights of some church members over others. Overriding the protests of many women, the delegates voted to segregate the new church and to negate the clergy rights won by women in the MEC and the Methodist Protestant Church. Alice G. Knotts argues that “The [southern]women's choice to align themselves with the black caucus during discussions preceding the merger raised their awareness of institutional racial discrimination in the new

church. Sensitized by the merger to experiences of discrimination based on gender, especially those impeding women in ministry, they cultivated new political sophistication.”<sup>2</sup> As the Woman’s Division expanded their pursuit of a more just society outside of the church, particularly as it concerned women and minorities, the women’s vision for the world increasingly diverged with the church’s conservatism. They now had to fight a simultaneous parallel battle for a more just society within the church, a fight that continued into the twenty-first century.

In 1939, delegates of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church gathered at a special General Conference to finally vote on a merger of the three denominations. The two largest groups, the MEC and the MECS, had split almost a century earlier over issues of slavery. Yet beginning in the early 1900s, male members of the two denominations began entertaining the idea of reunification. Both northern and southern Methodist leaders tended to have wealth, political power, and social standing. They believed the reach of their influence could only be extended by unification.<sup>3</sup> The issue of race was still a barrier, however, as representatives from the three churches spent years debating the place of black members and black churches in a new, unified church. The MEC had many black members and congregations in both northern and southern states. Ultimately, the delegates voted for a segregated church: five regional jurisdictions and a sixth, the Central Jurisdiction, for African American churches and pastors, annual conferences, and bishops. The southern church won the day, and the new Methodist Church denied black members full rights within the denomination.

Beginning in 1940, southern women found themselves in a church whose very foundation was rooted in a vote that denied the equality of all people. Though the MECS had never been a

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<sup>2</sup> Knotts, 91.

<sup>3</sup> Davis, *The Methodist Unification*, 5–8.

welcoming denomination, by its dissolution in 1939 the women had moved beyond the vision of a church for whites only. Thus, women set out in their new national venture to shape a church and a society that would honor the worth of all. Uniting women's work was a daunting task. The merger brought together six different women's groups across three denominations. In preparation, the presidents of the national women's organizations held several meetings of both leadership and members. Their preparation paid off. At the first General Conference of the new church in 1940, the delegates approved the women's plan for their new organization unanimously.<sup>4</sup> This was a far different conference experience than that of southern Methodist women in 1910, when men of the church overrode women's opposition and voted to create the WMC. Yet the fact that women were once again being forced into a new women's organization was not lost on southern women. Mrs. J.W. Perry, in her last address as president of the WMC in 1939, called it the WMC's "pilgrimage to the place of its birth – to the place where it received its name and from where the women of the Southern Methodist Church were thrust forth into new and untried ways."<sup>5</sup> At least this time around, women were more central to the creation of the new organization and had the ability to vote on it as delegates.

As they prepared for this new venture, WMC leaders reminded southern women that they would be crucial actors in the new national organization. Perry acknowledged the WMC's long history of activism, writing, "Southern Methodism will put at the disposal of Methodist Union the experience of thirty years in a Unified Board of Missions."<sup>6</sup> Thelma Stevens, in her quarterly letter to auxiliary superintendents of Christian Social Relations in 1939, assured them that unification "means a broadening of our interests, an enlargement of our purposes, and a

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<sup>4</sup> Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient*, 284–85.

<sup>5</sup> "Twenty Ninth Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council" (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1938), 66.

<sup>6</sup> "Twenty Ninth Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council," 69.

challenge to a larger fellowship.” But her superintendents would need to work diligently to ensure the new organization maintained their commitment to certain issues: “It is your responsibility and mine to help generate the power in our Missionary Society and Church that will keep us in action in every area where there is need.” The tasks were many, but so were the rewards:

You will have your interest in citizenship problems such as cleaning up the ‘dirty tricks’ in balloting that many of our communities practice, health problems, education, recreation, delinquency, etc; you will have your interests in groups of other races in your community; you are concerned with ways of building a peace-loving world; standards of employment, wages, hours, hunger; lack of opportunities for many stare you in the face; you are facing the challenge of the need for an integrated Church program in our rural community! In fact, it is your ‘major responsibility’ to be the backbone of the missionary society when it comes to social action, fearless but sane, conscious of need but not emotionally unstable, much in prayer but aware that God works through human instruments – open-minded and Christ-conscious always.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in 1940, southern women entered a new era of church-based activism, prepared to be the “backbone” of the new women’s organization.

The Woman’s Division of Christian Service was a progressive arm of the new Methodist Church. The Woman’s Division had a great deal of independence from the larger church, as it raised its own funds and thus decided how to allocate resources. This independence allowed the Woman’s Division to take stances on issues unrestricted by the views of the larger church. Women’s work in foreign and home missions continued in two large departments dedicated to those fields. However, much had changed by the 1940s. The women now had New Deal institutions at their back. They had worked hard to support the creation of a welfare state that would address their traditional concerns for tenants, workers, and poverty. But two of their priorities – race and women’s place within the denomination – were still pressing, and southern

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<sup>7</sup> Stevens, “To Auxiliary Superintendents of Christian Social Relations,” First Quarter 1939, 1–2.

women placed a new emphasis on these issues after 1940, led in large part by Thelma Stevens and the Department of Christian Social Relations.

Stevens was a driving force not only behind the Department but the entire Woman's Division's activity on race. In 1948, she convinced the Woman's Division to formally call for the abolition of the Central Jurisdiction, the segregated conference for African American churches and pastors. She also pressed the Division to hire an attorney, Pauli Murray, to compile a record of Jim Crow laws across the nation. Published in 1951 as *States' Laws on Race and Color*, the report facilitated lawsuits aimed at collapsing Jim Crow. Thurgood Marshall called it "the bible of desegregation," and he used the report in his work on *Brown v. Board of Education*. Stevens wrote the first draft of a Charter of Racial Policies, which the Woman's Division revised and adopted in 1952. With Stevens at the helm of its racial work, the Woman's Division supported the Freedom Riders in 1961, assisted civil rights workers in Mississippi during Freedom Summer 1964, and joined the 1965 march from Selma.<sup>8</sup>

Southern white women had learned the value of developing relationships and collaborations with black leadership through the WMC. WMC leaders' attendance at the 1920 National Association of Colored Women meeting had been a transformative experience. For the first time, WMC leaders listened rather than taught. They attended the meeting to learn from black leaders, rather than to lead a meeting for black women that would teach them some skill. Though membership was at times slow to respond to the organization's new direction, WMC leadership pushed the society into a new era of interracialism over paternalism.

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<sup>8</sup> Janet Allured, "Thelma Stevens," in *Mississippi Encyclopedia* (Center for Study of Southern Culture, April 26, 2019), <http://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/thelma-stevens/>; For a thorough examination of Methodist women's work for civil rights through 1968, see Knotts, *Fellowship of Love*.



These experiences, combined with their discomfiture with the segregated nature of the new church, led white women to seek out new allies in their work for racial equality. For the first time, African American Methodist women shared in decision-making and leadership of the Methodist women's campaign for civil rights. Stevens developed District Institutes, leadership training events led and attended by black and white women. According to Alice Knotts, "In racially mixed settings the process of open discussion enabled prejudiced assumptions to be re-examined and challenged while women lived and ate together."<sup>9</sup> Black women also became leaders at the highest levels of women's work. Though black women were officers in the conference-level Woman's Division in the Central Jurisdiction, the national Woman's Division also hired black women as professional staff members. Stevens's department hired Charlotte R. French as its office secretary, one of only three staff members. In 1952, Ethel Watkins-Cost became the associate secretary for the Department. Four black women served as fieldworkers assigned to the Central Jurisdiction between 1940 and 1968: Lillian Warrick-Pope, Vivienne Newton-Gray, Dorothy L. Barnette, and Theresa Hoover. As a field worker, Hoover assisted in the integration of Methodist churches in Little Rock, AR. When the Methodist Church united with the Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUBC) in 1968, Theresa Hoover became the associate general secretary – the chief executive officer – of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church, the first African American woman to hold that position.<sup>10</sup>

The Woman's Division demanded a more inclusive church for African Americans and for women. Southern women had fought for years only to gain the most basic rights within their denomination, and the bitterness of the 1939 segregated merger was never far from their minds.

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<sup>9</sup> Knotts, *Fellowship of Love*, 92, 148–49.

<sup>10</sup> Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient*, 288–89.

The WMC's thirty years of experiencing and witnessing second-tier membership provided the backdrop for the Woman's Divisions aggressive challenges to the denomination on its policies. In 1956, local Woman's Division auxiliaries submitted over two thousand petitions asking for full clergy rights for women. The General Conference conceded, and almost four decades after southern women gained laity rights in the MECS, women finally won full clergy rights. Four years later, the 1960 General Conference established a Commission on Interjurisdictional Relations that would prepare a plan for eliminating the Central Jurisdiction. The Woman's Division issued several proposals as to how they thought the church would move forward. They relied heavily on the recommendations of the Committee of Five, a committee established by the Central Jurisdiction to make sure their concerns were heard. In 1963, the women, along with nine other Methodist agencies, held a Conference on Human Relations. Representatives from across the Methodist Church joined the women in calling for an end to the Central Jurisdiction, a request the Woman's Division had made every four years since 1948. According to Knotts, "As a direct result of the work of the Woman's Division and the Conference on Human Relations, the 1964 General Conference adopted strong new commitments to racial inclusiveness" and dissolved the Central Jurisdiction into the regional conferences.<sup>11</sup> By the time the Methodist Church joined with the EUBC to form the United Methodist Church in 1968, women had finally succeeded in creating a church that gave full membership rights to both women and African Americans. But the fight did not end there. After 1968, the United Methodist Women still battled inequality within and outside the church, a fight that would follow them well into the twenty first century.

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<sup>11</sup> Knotts, *Fellowship of Love*, 246–49.

“In 1939, the UMC was trying to figure out what to do with black people. At that [general conference], the Central Jurisdiction was voted into being. The late Bishop Thomas wrote that the white folks stood up and clapped, and the black folks sat down and cried.” These are the words of Reverend Bryon Thomas in 2019. A black clergy delegate from Atlanta, Georgia, Thomas was speaking in support of a plan that would allow for divergent views of LGBTQ rights in the United Methodist Church at the specially called General Conference in 2019. Thomas made a direct connection between the experiences of black Methodists in 1939 as to that of LGBTQ members in 2019. “I believe that we are at another stand up and clap, sit down and cry moment,” he warned the stadium of delegates.<sup>12</sup> This was a new century, a new theological debate, and a new challenge to the church’s creed. But eighty years after northern and southern Methodists voted to merge into a segregated denomination, Methodists gathered once more to ask a similar question as that debated in 1939: who has the right to full membership in the Methodist church? Yet in this debate, delegates from around the world argued over the place of LGBTQ members within the church. The question over what to do about exclusionary language in the UMC Book of Discipline, which addressed the acceptability of gay clergy and same-sex marriage, and whether individual churches could ethically stay in the denomination if the decision did not go their way, threatened to divide the largest mainline Protestant denomination in the United States.

The United Methodist Women (UMW), the modern descendent of the WMC and the Woman’s Division, decried the actions of the church that, once again, sought to vote on and legislate the value of its members. In a release prior to the Special General Conference, the

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<sup>12</sup> Bill Chappell, “United Methodist Church Votes To Keep Bans On Same-Sex Weddings, LGBTQ Clergy,” *NPR*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/26/698188343/united-methodist-church-votes-to-keep-bans-on-same-sex-weddings-lgbtq-clergy>.

UMW wrote of the “church’s contradiction of declaring all people as having sacred worth yet legislating the exclusion of ‘self-avowing, practicing homosexuals’ from full participation.”<sup>13</sup> In some ways, the UMW is much changed from its predecessors. But the legacy of the work done by southern women in the WMC and in the Woman’s Division is still felt. One needs only to look at the four social action campaigns set for the 2016-2020 quadrennium to see both progress and work rooted in that of the WMC a century earlier: climate justice, maternal and child health, criminalization of communities of color and mass incarceration, and economic inequality. As women continue to work for a more just society, they also find themselves in a similar fight as that of 1939: for a just church.

Though the UMW did not endorse one of the many plans voted on at the Special General Conference, their disappointment in the outcome – a conservative “Traditional Plan” – was clear. The Traditional Plan not only preserved the existing language of the Book of Discipline but added disciplinary actions against Bishops and pastors who broke the directives. The UMW interpreted the Traditional Plan as an invitation to “clergy, bishops and congregations who do not support the church’s stand regarding LGBTQIA persons to leave the denomination and form another expression of Methodism.” Both the exclusion of LGBTQ members from full membership rights and the implication that anyone who did not like it should leave was antithetical to the mission of the UMW, which Harriett Jane Olson, chief executive officer of the UMW, made clear in a post-conference news release:

While our membership has many opinions about the matters considered at General Conference, United Methodist Women stands together, committed to serving women, children and youth...For United Methodist Women, commitment to the Purpose and prayer are the only litmus tests for determining who can belong, who can serve and who can devote themselves to mission. Our differences make us stronger. We continue to be open to any woman who chooses to commit to our Purpose and mission. The Special

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<sup>13</sup> Tara Barnes, “Deciding a Way Forward,” United Methodist Women, January 28, 2019, <https://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/news/deciding-a-way-forward>.

General Conference was difficult for all—even the Traditional Plan adopted may not be enforceable—but LGBTQIA sisters and brothers bear the brunt of the pain. United Methodist Women will continue to pray for our beloved church and stand in solidarity with all those who are in pain. United Methodist Women will continue our focus on mission, living out our Christian discipleship together, and addressing the needs of women, children and youth.<sup>14</sup>

As in years past, the work of Methodist women continues, despite setbacks and disagreements. In the eyes of Methodist women leadership, the struggle within the church should not detract from the struggle without. The fight over LGBTQ members is far from over; the upcoming 2020 General Conference will again take up the issue and could potentially upend the previous decisions. The 1939 delegates hoped for a merger; the 2019 delegates stood on the precipice of schism. All questioned who had the right to full membership. Whether Methodist women will be more successful at creating an equitable, unified church today than they were in 1939 remains to be seen.

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<sup>14</sup> Jane Olson, “United Methodist Women Vows to Work Across Difference, Create Inclusive Spaces for All,” United Methodist Women, February 27, 2019, <https://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/news/united-methodist-women-vows-to-work-across-difference>.

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